Interview with Joseph A. Mendenhall

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR JOSEPH A. MENDENHALL

Interviewed by: Horace Torbert

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Q: This is an interview with Ambassador Joseph Mendenhall made under the auspices of the Association for Diplomatic Studies at DACOR Bacon House in Washington D.C. on February 11, 1991. I am very happy to grab this opportunity while you are here on one of your annual visits to the United States to get recorded some of your history and add to our collection of what makes the Foreign Service run.

MENDENHALL: As an old friend from our retirement days, Ambassador Torbert—may I call you Tully? Can we be informal on this?

Q: You certainly may.

MENDENHALL: I am delighted to collaborate with you.

Q: Now that we are on first name terms again, the best way to start off this interview is for you to tell us a little bit about your initial interest in the foreign affairs field and how you came to get into the Foreign Service. Then we will continue with your various posts.

MENDENHALL: Well, like so many things in life, Tully, I got into the Foreign Service, at least partly, perhaps even largely, by accident. I did develop an interest in the foreign

affairs field in particular during World War II when part of my service was devoted to operating a war orientation room following the developments in the war. I also was considerably influenced during that period by two books by Walter Lippmann—"U.S. Foreign Policy" and "U.S. War Aims"—which did a lot to define my thinking in the foreign policy field and in that era. To be more specific, after about four years in the armed forces I just happened to be in Washington after assignment to the Office of Strategic Services in July, 1945 and was between training assignments for OSS, when one afternoon having nothing better to do I said to myself, "Why don't I go down to the State Department and inquire about Foreign Service examinations." I was aware that none had been given since our entry into the war. I found out at the State Department that indeed the first—it wasn't exactly a post-war examination, the war was over with Germany but we were still at war with Japan at that stage—the first examination in years was scheduled and applications were then being accepted and there was only one more week to the deadline. So by accident, as I say, I got my application in. There was nothing to lose, I didn't know what else I was going to do. I thought I would investigate all possibilities of conceivable interest for what I might do after the war was over and I was demobilized. I did take the first examination while I was still in uniform.

Q: That was about August...?

MENDENHALL: No, it was in November, 1945. I took it at Aberdeen Proving Grounds. The two-day examination—I don't think I have to go into what it consisted of, I am sure you have that in your historical records—what I did to prepare for it was to review my college notes for about three weekends prior to the time I took the examination. That apparently worked because I came through the written—I don't remember the score—but I came through quite well, as I recall. Then I had to wait about eight months for the oral examination. In the meantime I had been demobilized and was married shortly thereafter. I had a civilian job with the interim successor between OSS and the establishment of the CIA. That interim successor was called the Strategic Services Unit at the War Department.

I got married, went off for a week on a honeymoon, came back to Washington and found that my job had fallen through. So here I was with a new wife and no job.

Q: I had almost the same experience at the beginning of the war.

MENDENHALL: I pounded the streets here for about three weeks and then was rehired by the Strategic Services Unit as an editor and analyst on reports coming in from China. I worked for that organization for several months and while I was there took the oral examination in June, 1946. I succeeded in passing that but still I had to wait, of course, for the call of entry into the Foreign Service. That came in August and then came the first big decision. I had been told by the president of my oral board that I had sufficiently impressed the board that they were going to recommend that I come in at the next instep grade higher than my age warranted. In other words, instead of coming in at the grand salary of $3600 a year I would come in at $3900 a year. When I received the summons to duty by the State Department it said $3600 a year. Well, I was already making $4900 a year at the Strategic Services Unit, which made that a substantial drop in income. I rushed down to the personnel section of the State Department, talked to an old gentleman who, I think, subsequently became an ambassador and was never a favorite of mine because of the outcome of my conversation with him. He gruffly looked through my files and said, “There is nothing in here about such a recommendation by your oral board so you will come in at $3600.” I explained my dilemma and he said, “Well, we are offering you a career and you don't have one where you are.” So after considerable pondering I did decide to take this drop in salary and come into the Foreign Service. As a matter of fact I didn't get back to $4900 until I think three years later in the Service. I went through the then month of training here in the Department. We were asked to submit our preferences for post assignments. There was much hilarity among the group of entrants saying they would be meaningless, but I put down first, Peking, since I had been working on China here in Washington; second, Vienna, I think for romantic reasons—had I gone to Vienna at that time it would have been a scene of very considerable war damage; and third, Istanbul. To

my great surprise we got Istanbul. I think that was also a romantic decision simply because of Constantinople's long place in history for a couple of millennia.

Q: Before we get in to Istanbul, do you mind going back a little bit and giving us a couple of hundred words on your total military career because that is a very useful thing to have as most of us who came in about that time had military experience?

MENDENHALL: Tully, I can't lay claim to any very distinguished military career. I was in the second batch which registered for selective service in July, 1941. I had just had one year of law school at Harvard and I thought I could at least get a second year. To my consternation within a month after I had registered, I received my draft notice. This was August and by October I was inducted into the army as a buck private and was sent into the infantry. I had two months of infantry training when Pearl Harbor day came. At that point the powers to be in the armed forces decided to pick up 1300 of us at Camp Wheeler, Georgia, where we were in infantry training, and send us down into the swamps near Tampa, Florida as the nucleus for the establishment of a signal aircraft warning service. The fear at that time was that the United States might be subject to air attack and we were setting up an aircraft warning service around the borders of the United States and also of Latin America. So I spent about three or four months being trained as a radio operator. I could have told the army that since I had no ear for music that the “dit-dah-dits” were pretty difficult for me. I think I finally got up to 16 words a minute, but I never would have made much of a radio operator.

In the meantime I kept trying to get in an application to go to Officer Candidate School, but I was told repeatedly that I was on temporary assignment and my application couldn't be accepted. So many months went by until the summer of 1942 when I finally got my application accepted and I managed to get into Officer Candidate School at Miami Beach. After three months there I got my bars as a second lieutenant.

I was assigned to air force intelligence in Yuma, Arizona for about two and a half years. It was interesting for a while, but I know in retrospect that I stayed far too long and toward the end was becoming annoyed with this assignment. A recruiter from the Office of Strategic Services passed through, interviewed me and I indicated an interest in transfer to OSS. I heard nothing more.

Meanwhile I was transferred to an overseas replacement depot in North Carolina in preparation for shipment to Europe. While I was on route there, V-E Day came. So that project disappeared. Then I was placed in an assignment for the Pacific. But before that actually came through the OSS decided to summon me to Washington. I went into training for OSS, specifically Korean language training. I had been in that two weeks at the University of Pennsylvania when V-J Day came.

So, as you see, my military career has nothing very exciting to say about it. I did while I was in intelligence at Yuma, Arizona, operate the war room which did get me interested in the Foreign Service.

I also add as a footnote to this account of my military experience that I would have been, probably, one of the first soldiers out of the United States in February, 1942 had a great catastrophe not taken place. I was sent from my station in Florida with about 1700 others by train to Fort Dix, New Jersey to be shipped overseas. While we were on the train, the old French liner Normandy was sabotaged, turned over and burned in New York harbor. After four weeks of doing nothing in Fort Dix, New Jersey we went right back to the post in Florida from where we had come—that camp in the swamp. There we learned that we had been scheduled to sail on the Normandy. Where we would have gone I was not powerful enough to find out from the War Department. But I assume since it was the signal aircraft warning service, it might have been Latin America or it could have well been Northern Ireland, because we were at that point just beginning to send troops there. So

between February, 1942 and May of 1945, when I again was slated to go overseas, I was on domestic assignment here in the United States.

Q: Well, I spent four years in the Ordnance Department in the United States. Your having taken the exams in Aberdeen impresses me because that was the closest overseas post I had in the army. Lets get back to Istanbul. Do you want to describe what you found when you got there?

MENDENHALL: I went over on the boat with another officer who had just entered and when we arrived in Istanbul we learned that the Ambassador in Ankara wanted to assign one of the two new arriving officers to the single political slot in the Consulate General in Istanbul. I already knew that political work was supposed to be the glamor part of the Foreign Service so I was eager for this assignment. But I lost out to him because his French was better than mine. I could read French perfectly on the basis of what I had done in college, but I didn't dare open my mouth anywhere. He had had some experience during the war as a liaison officer with the French. The Ambassador to my disappointment, but I must say quite fairly, chose him over me for the political assignment.So I went into the economic and commercial section. It was largely a commercial section. I had some economics in college, but I must say it had done very little in the way of preparing me for Foreign Service economic work. When I arrived there were two of us in the economic section. An old officer who had been in the commercial service of the Department of Commerce first and later been integrated into the Foreign Service, and myself. He left after several months. He was not at all a trainer. I learned very little under him, but after he left I had to sink or swim because I was the only officer in the section for a while.

I began to dig in after several months and did begin to learn my way around. I took over, for example, his monthly financial reports which were of significance because although the Embassy in Ankara did the financial reporting on the budget of the government, most of the other financial reporting was done for the country as a whole from Istanbul because it was the financial and commercial center of the country.

I really had to learn my way around in that field. I remember interviewing bankers every month to get my information for this report and I scarcely knew what questions to ask. But I guess I came through all right because I remained friends with these bankers and I began to get some commendations on my financial reports from Washington.

Then I began to do several other types of reporting in this field. One of which in particular I have always remembered. I prepared a special report, voluntary report as we used to call them at that time, on the foreign investment policies and procedures with respect to Turkey. Today that wouldn't sound very significant with all the private organizations as well as official organizations that prepare this sort of thing. But 45 years ago that kind of thing didn't exist. There was nothing at all in private or official literature on how to go about making foreign investment in Turkey. I prepared this report and was told later by an official here in the Department that that report remained the standard one on foreign investment in Turkey for upwards of a decade. So I have always been rather proud of what I did on that. I remember I gathered all the information I could and wrote the report and then submitted it to the leading American businessman in Istanbul for review. He had very few comments to make. In fact he indicated that as far as businessmen were concerned it met their requirements.

The other thing that I did in the way of reporting of some significance in Istanbul was to prepare special reports on the import and export systems of Turkey and also on barter trading which at that time in Turkey was called compensation trading. The Turks had learned a lot from the Germans during the previous decade. The Germans had been very significant in furthering barter and clearing trade as it is called. The U.S. had never been very much involved in that, but even today there is considerable barter trading between the West and Eastern Europe. Certainly there was before the East European countries got their freedom. I suspect with their foreign exchange shortages there still is. And that was the main reason for so much barter trading then. Nobody had much foreign exchange.

One of the things that I had to do as part of my financial reporting in Istanbul was to try to dig out of Turkey's central bank branch in Istanbul what the foreign exchange reserves of the country were, they were classified at that time, and how much might be made available for imports. At that time, the American businessman who came to Turkey, including such significant firms as General Motors, came in and his principal question was “Do you have any idea how much foreign exchange our distributors might be able to get in order to import from us.” That was the day of the dollar shortage all over the world. Just the reverse of the situation today—there is such a big dollar surplus everywhere. Interesting how history changes.

These, Tully were, I think, the more significant things that I did during my service in Istanbul.

Q: Who was the Consul General?

MENDENHALL: I had three Consuls General while I was there. The first was Robert Macatee, a very senior Foreign Service Officer, who left within three months after my arrival for assignment as Consul General in Jerusalem. Mr. Macatee was a rather meek and mild man, but I have always considered him a man of considerable courage because his predecessor as Consul General in Jerusalem had been blown up in the great bomb explosion in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. Macatee was chosen as his successor.

He was succeeded by Clarence Macy. Macy was only an FSO-3 when he came there. He was close to retirement age. He was a man whose career was greatly handicapped by his wife. Macy was a soldier in World War I and met a French lady afterwards and married her. Macy was a man who always had to speak French with his wife. He was absolutely fluent in French but his accent was pure Missouri. His wife had handicapped his career because of a certain peculiarity in her personality. She was pleasant enough to subordinates but she was always nasty to superiors which is just the reverse of what often happened in the Foreign Service. Therefore, poor Macy hadn't gotten ahead nearly

as far as I thought his ability warranted. He was a man who had as much common sense as any Foreign Service officer I ever encountered. But the poor fellow had to retire after 18 months in Istanbul at the age of 60 because he had reached the retirement age.

He was succeeded by a man by the name of John McDonald who had been our Consul General in Taipei. McDonald was a younger officer than Macy, who was thought to have considerable future in the Foreign Service, but for some reason he never went very far. I don't know what the story was there. My two and a half years in Istanbul were up within a few months after his arrival and I don't know what became of him afterwards.

Q: Well, then you went off to quite a different part of the world—Reykjavik.

MENDENHALL: That is right, I went to Iceland and I will give you the history of why. I left Istanbul assigned to Manila and came back to Washington and went into a training course in the Department of Commerce for a few weeks. While I was in that my Manila assignment was canceled and I was assigned to Jakarta. Meanwhile, the man who had been the economic counselor in Ankara, Edward Lawson, was named as our Minister to Iceland. At that time, as you remember, we still had quite a number of Legations. Lawson was named as Minister and was concurrently going to be the head of the Marshall Plan Mission in Iceland. They didn't have a separate head as in many European countries. He asked me if I would go to Iceland with him to run the Marshall Plan for him. I replied that I would be delighted. But, the Department said he could have Mendenhall if he found a replacement for him for Jakarta. So Lawson spent all summer of 1949 trying to find a replacement for me and I didn't know whether to buy tropical clothing or arctic clothing for my next assignment. He finally succeeded in September in getting a replacement and my assignment to Reykjavik was made official and I had to rush around and get myself ready to go to a cold climate.

Interestingly enough, when we arrived early October in Reykjavik, the ground was already frozen. We checked in to the only hotel that then existed in Reykjavik, the Hotel Borg and

within two nights after our arrival I broke out into a heat rash. Why? Because we were sleeping under eider down quilts. I never have been able to distribute those feathers in eider down quilts in such a way that I am comfortable under them.

We stayed in Iceland for a bit over two years and both my wife and I learned to love it and the Icelanders. The Icelanders are a very reserved people. Not easy to break into, but if they conclude that one treats them as absolute equals and doesn't make any disparaging remarks about their small country and limited population, pretty soon they take you in and they are the warmest friends one will have in the world.

I was extremely busy in the Marshall Plan Mission. By the time I left the United States had extended $30 million in aid to Iceland, which I suppose in today's money would be somewhere between $300 or $400 million. I was the only officer administering that whole program. Minister Lawson preoccupied himself almost completely with the diplomatic mission and I did all the negotiating in connection with the Marshall Plan as well as the administering. The Marshall Plan Headquarters here in Washington and the European Headquarters in Paris were mechanisms that churned out immense amounts of paper destined for the much larger missions in other countries and Iceland got every bit of paper that went to everyone else.I had to winnow it out. Just that job alone took a lot of time.

The substantive part of the job was interesting and required a great deal of time. We constructed three major projects under the aid program—two hydroelectric projects and a nitrogenous fertilizer plant. We worked with the Icelanders to improve their exports, particularly with the United States. We inaugurated a technical assistance program to Iceland and the first project under that was to bring a fish marketing expert from Boston over to advise the Icelanders about their marketing procedures to the United States. One of the things in particular that he recommended was that for the U.S. market you don't need to skin the frozen fish as you do for Europe. The Americans eat the skins so just freeze it and send it—you will get more money that way.

Q: You don't happen to remember the name of the Boston expert do you?

MENDENHALL: I can't remember his name. I might add that the position to which I was assigned in the Marshall Plan organization was the equivalent of an FSO-3 and I was then an FSO-5. At that stage, remember, we had only 6 numbered classes in the Foreign Service. I was in the next to the bottom. I did get some differential in salary because of this assignment, but the Department would not permit me to draw the complete differential between an FSO-5 and an FSO-3 assignment. Typical at that time on the part of the Department, like my argument when I was coming in whether I should get $3600 or $3900. The Department never conceded very much in financial terms.

Q: They always thought you should be so pleased being a Foreign Service officer.

MENDENHALL: After a little over two years in Iceland, we received our transfer assignment to Switzerland. I was pleased because although we had enjoyed Iceland very much it was pleasant to contemplate a different kind of post which looked as though it might be better in the physical sense than Iceland had been. But I do remember after getting my orders Minister Lawson talked to me about the new assignment and said, “I can see you are pleased with that and I can understand it, but I am not sure it is going to be a very good assignment from a career standpoint as far as you are concerned, because the American interests in Switzerland are so limited that you are not going to be challenged very often”. Well I just brushed this off because I was looking forward to being in the heart of Europe.

It turned out he was absolutely correct in his assessment of the assignment. The Swiss are so self-sufficient in almost every respect that the United States has never had any very substantial interests in that country as we have in so many others around the world over the past 50 years.

I found myself in Switzerland assigned initially to the economic section and doing the same kind of reporting that I had been doing in Istanbul at the outset of my career. So Lawson was absolutely right it was not challenging at all.The one thing that was new to me in my work there was the labor reporting activity. I had never had any association with labor before and I did learn what labor and labor organizations were all about. I made the acquaintance of and cultivated the grand old man of the Swiss labor movement, Conrad Ilg. He had been the head of the Swiss movement then for 20 to 25 years. He was the George Meany of Switzerland.

I remember almost literally sitting at his feet and listening to him as he would talk, reminisce, advise, instruct over the situation not only in Switzerland but that in Europe. He talked to me about Hitler's rise in Germany, which he attributed in very substantial measure to the great depression in the economic field and the extremely high unemployment in Germany. At that time, of course, we were in occupation in Germany and he said, “I urge you to always think of the German economy. Don't let it go into decline. If you keep the Germans reasonably happy economically then you will not have these terrible political problems, which we had in the 30s and 40s in Germany.” I have never forgotten his advice.

Q: I hope you reported that.

MENDENHALL: I did. After several months in the economic section, I was transferred to the political section which pleased me greatly because at that point, seven years in the service, I still had had no political assignment. As political work was considered the glamor part of the Foreign Service and often the avenue through which to get promotions, I was very pleased to move over into it. The political section had consisted of four officers. This was the time when the Republicans came to Washington, and Secretary Dulles cut back on the personnel strength of the State Department and the Foreign Service and certainly as far as Switzerland was concerned, very wisely so. We were grossly overstaffed in that Embassy. We had four officers in the political section and were cut down to one. We had

five in the economic section and were cut down to two. We had two science attach#s and they were both abolished.

I might add a little personal note to this. My father-in-law, who was a German language expert who examined documents captured from the Germans during the war while in the Navy, in 1947 got a job with the newly established CIA, heading the research and intelligence activity of the CIA related to the UN and other international organizations. In 1950 his entire unit was shifted from CIA to the State Department. When Mr. Dulles arrived in 1953, this was one of the organizations he considered surplus. The whole unit was chopped down. My father-in-law lost his job and decided to retire at that point. Even to his death, just a couple of years ago, he never had any love for John F. Dulles.

As for my assignment to the political section, I remained in that for about two and a half years. Although it looked fairly good on my record I can't say there was anything very challenging about what I did in that area in Switzerland. Swiss politics are just as stable as the Swiss economy. Nothing very exciting ever happens in the Swiss political world.

Q: They just rotate chairman of the council don't they?

MENDENHALL: Well, there are seven members of the Federal Council and they usually are reelected and serve until death. The presidency rotates every year among the seven. The president is no more significant than any of the other Federal Councilor.

As a matter of fact, I might tell a little story about the man who was president when we were there, a Mr. Etter. The Swiss are noted for being rather tightfisted and he was typically Swiss in that respect. The story went around that Mr. Etter was seen one day riding on a train in second class. Someone asked, “Mr. President, why are you riding second class?” He said, “Because there isn't any lower class.”

The Swiss, also, are noted for adherence to law and regulations. There is a story about the Minister of Defense during World War II—a man well-loved by the Swiss, but they

tell this story about him. He was also a great devotee of trains and he had a passenger car installed on his front lawn. He and his wife used to go out and sit in it every evening because he loved trains so much. One evening someone saw him and his wife out there trying to push the car back and forward. They said, “Mr. Minister, what are you doing?” He said, “It says inside that you can flush the toilet only when the train is in motion.”

Q: Did you deal in both internal politics and whatever foreign relations there were?

MENDENHALL: Yes. I also took my labor reporting over with me to the political section. Besides the old gentleman I was also very close friends with a young Swiss who worked both in the Swiss labor movement and an International Labor Federation in Geneva—not connected with the ILO, an organization of labor unions around the world. I found him one of my best sources of information as well as a very good friend.

I also took on a political reporting program that the State Department had inaugurated in Western Europe of reporting information that could be gathered in Western Europe about conditions in Eastern Europe. This was known as the peripheral reporting program. One of the four political officers had devoted his time completely to this field. When his position was abolished, I took on the residue of his work. There was nothing of very great significance that we picked up in that area in Switzerland.

Q: It was too hard for the refugees to get in to Switzerland...

MENDENHALL: They usually had been gone so long that they had nothing of any great significance to report. The one thing of some interest that I remember doing—in the summer of 1953 I was the duty officer for the weekend. I received a telephone call from that great old Foreign Service officer, Alex Johnson—I think he was then a deputy assistant secretary for Far Eastern Affairs. We were then trying to negotiate an armistice with the Chinese communists and North Koreans in Korea. One of the issues was the establishment of a neutral nations supervisory commission. The proposal was that the UN with the US at the head of the Korean group at the UN would choose two Western

countries and we hoped to put forward Switzerland and Sweden. The Communists would choose two “neutral” countries—theirs were Poland and, I believe, Czechoslovakia, communist countries from Eastern Europe which were about as un-neutral as any thing in the world at that stage. So I received a telephone call that Sunday. The armistice agreement was on the point of being concluded, but the Swiss had not yet consented to participate. So I had to get hold of the Swiss to see if they would agree to take part and indeed they did agree within a few days. I simply transmitted the message. The armistice was concluded in Korea which ended the Korean War. I can't say I played a very significant role, but at least a minor connection with ending that conflict.

Q: I suppose the general run of international conferences was handled from Geneva?

MENDENHALL: Yes, that is right. Other than reporting Swiss reaction to the Conference on Indochina which started in June, 1954—Swiss press reaction. Switzerland was blessed with probably, in my judgment, the best press in the world. When I was stationed there, there were six good newspapers in Switzerland. About half of them in French and half in German. Their editorial reactions to events around the world were of some considerable interest because they were such responsible journalists. I wish I could say as much for the United States today, but I can't.

Q: Certainly, wherever I was during my entire career in Europe subscribed to the Neue Zuercher Zeitung in which everything was published. It may not have been very exciting, but everything was published.

MENDENHALL: As a matter of fact when I was stationed in Switzerland, the Neue Zuercher Zeitung had done three editions per day and none of the news was repeated in any of those three editions. I think the Neue Zuercher Zeitung is probably the single best newspaper in the world.

Q: But not very easy reading.

MENDENHALL: No, it isn't.

Q: By this time you were handling both French and German pretty well?

MENDENHALL: French, my German was never very good, Tully. I read the paper but with difficulty. I should have done more in German. I taught myself while I was there. But I never claimed it was very good. My French was.

Q: Who were your Ambassadors while you were there?

MENDENHALL: The first one was a man by the name of Patterson. He had been a political ambassador to both Yugoslavia and, I believe Poland [it was Guatemala] and then came to Switzerland as Minister. At that time there was only one ambassador in Switzerland—the French Ambassador. The French had insisted since the Napoleonic conquest of Switzerland that their mission be headed by an ambassador. The Swiss to save money would not let any other country raise their missions to the level of ambassador—they did not want to name ambassadors in reciprocity. By that time many of the countries were beginning to push the Swiss pretty hard on his including the Americans. The Swiss finally decided to go along, but not as long as Patterson was there.

I will tell you a little story about Patterson to indicate the kind of political ambassador he was. One day the Syrian Charg# came to pay his diplomatic call on the ambassador. The ambassador wanted the Syrian to point out on the map where his country was. The ambassador got the Syrian so confused by the time they got up to the map he couldn't point out his own country.

Patterson was succeeded by Frances Willis who is very famous in the Foreign Service as our first career woman officer to be named as an ambassador. Indeed, very surprisingly, the Swiss who did not even permit women to vote agreed to accept her as the first American Ambassador to Switzerland. I enjoyed very much working for her. She was a very precise lady who knew her own mind. I got along extremely well with her and enjoyed

it very much. Not that I think any of us did anything of very great significance in our Swiss assignment.

Q: I knew her only socially, but I thought she was intelligent...

MENDENHALL: She was also a very human individual. When my family and I left Switzerland in June of 1955, we took a train from Bern, about 5:50 AM, for Genoa in order to catch a ship. She, the ambassador, insisted upon being down at the train station at that hour to see us off—a junior officer. This was rather typical of the very human attitude which she took towards all members of her staff.

Q: Now after seven or eight years you were going home—nine years.

MENDENHALL: Tully, here lies a story also. When I left Switzerland I was assigned again to Indonesia. Remember in 1949 I had been assigned there and hadn't gotten there. I was assigned to Indonesia, came back to the States on home leave, bought a car, and sent it off to Indonesia. Meanwhile the Department sent me to the Bethesda Hospital because during the last year I was in Switzerland I had suffered from a series of infections which, despite consultations with all the finest of the Swiss medical community, nobody had been able to diagnose. The Department felt it should be diagnosed before I went to a tropical country. So out I went to Bethesda. They didn't succeed in finding the source of my difficulties, but they did find in the course of the examinations that I had a kidney stone, which had never bothered me and still 35 years later hasn't bothered me. I was told then that it was too big to be passed if it ever became detached. The Department said, “You are going to have to stay in the US because the stone may be new and growing and we don't know what is going to happen to it. You have to be in a place where there is good hospital care.” So my assignment to Indonesia was canceled and I was thrust upon the Department without any preparation.

Q: And without the automobile.

MENDENHALL: Yes, without the automobile. It did finally come back. General Motors wrote me a letter and said that this car has put more miles on it without registering anything on the odometer than any car in our history—it had gone all the way around the world.

As for my assignment since there had been no advanced planning by the Department or by me with respect to it, the Department thrust me into the first and only opening for a Foreign Service officer at my grade that existed at that point which was a job in the Bureau of International Organizations dealing with crime, housing and other social matters. I was less than enthusiastic about this assignment and after one day on the job I went to the Director of the office, Walter Kotschnig and said, “I don't really want this assignment, I want out.” Well he proved to be a gentleman too and he said, “All right, I don't want you to be unhappy in the work here. I want somebody who would like to have the job.” He agreed that I could look for something else.

I went to Idar Rimestad who was then the man in charge of Washington assignments in the Personnel Division. He was not very happy with my decision at all. He said, “This is the only thing we have got. You should take it.” I again demurred. He said, “You will have to see if you can find anything, we don't have anything for you.”

So I managed to locate a job with the Office of Greece, Turkish and Irani Affairs as special assistant to the director. I had served in Turkey. The only trouble with that job was that there was no official slot for it and after 30 days the director of the office said, “There is no way in which I can keep you because we don't have any slot.” So here I was again without a job.

But meanwhile there was another opening in the Department at my level doing economic work in the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. The closest I had gotten to the Far East and Southeast Asia was Turkey which is about half a

world apart. I knew nothing about Southeast Asia. But I accepted the assignment faut de mieux—there was nothing else.

Interestingly enough that proved to be the start of a 15 year association on my part with Southeast Asia. I devoted the balk of my career to it. And I have had not regrets subsequently, although I was not very happy at the outset.

I worked for two and a half years in the economic section of the Office of Southeastern Affairs during economic work with respect to Thailand and Burma. I learned a good deal, particularly on finding one's way around the bureaucracy here in Washington. As you know, Tully, economic work here in Washington is probably more complex, certainly more time consuming than political work because there are so many agencies in our government which are interested in economics. In the political field one may have to clear with Defense and possibly CIA, but in the economic field in so many areas one has to clear with anywhere from 3, 6, 8, or 10 agencies and it has become enormously difficult to get a decision.

One of the most difficult areas in that respect was the old surplus agricultural commodities agreements, so-called PL 480 agreements. I think they had more clearances on them than any document I have ever seen throughout Washington. So it put me in touch with a lot of people and one had to find his way around in order to try to get clearances.

I will give you another example of that. I remember a meeting which I attended, I think it dealt with Burma, at which the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs presided, the number two man from the aid organization, then called ICA was present, and our Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. The subject of the meeting was one of considerable dissent and I have never seen a meeting end more in a shambles than that one. There was disagreement on everybody's part. As I walked out with the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs, Howard Jones, who later became our ambassador to Indonesia, he turned to me and said, “Would you draft

a telegram on the consensus of this meeting." I sort of looked taken aback and walked back to my office and said, "The only consensus I know is my own point of view on this. I'll draft a telegram reflecting my own point of view." To my great surprise it went through all these high ranking officials who had been at the meeting expressing diametrically opposite points of view—all signed off on the telegram. Well, that proved to me the veracity of one of the adages around the Department that policy is made on the basis of the cables.

Q: That is correct. The drafting officer has the whip hand.

MENDENHALL: It certainly was in that case.

I will give you another interesting experience I had, again in connection with Burma. Burma has never been a very significant country in American foreign policy. At that particular stage we were devoting, I think much more attention to it than subsequently, because we were very interested in preventing Burma from slipping into the communist bloc. But it was very difficult to get any funds out of Washington for Burma because it had not rated very high in the significance of our foreign policy. But in 1956 we got word, I think from our Embassy in Rangoon, that the two highest ranking officials of the Soviet Union then, Bulganin and Mikoyan, I think, were due to arrive in Rangoon the next day. Well, that really set the alarm bells ringing here in Washington. The Burma desk officer and I drafted a telegram authorizing a $25 million loan to Burma. Now there would have been utterly no chance of getting that cleared through the American government a day before. (That would have been the equivalent of $250 million today.) We managed to get that telegram through the government in less than six hours because the two highest Soviet officials were arriving in Rangoon the next day.

One of my great obstacles had been the working level official in the Bureau of Economic Affairs. He would never agree to anything, nor would his boss, an office director. Well it was late enough at night when we were drafting it that we had it signed off by the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs as they had gone home. Then we took the telegram to

Walter Robertson, the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, who often took a lot of authority on himself. But he decided he couldn't sign off for the Department on this. He would try to get ahold of the either the Secretary or the Under Secretary. Well, they had both left for the day, so he called the Under Secretary at his home. Since this was a highly classified telegram, Robertson read it to him sotto voce over the telephone. The Under Secretary, then Herbert Hoover, Jr., agreed. Robertson signed it and our $25 million loan authorization went to our Embassy in Rangoon to be passed on to the Burmese government.

The epilogue to this, I think the telegram arrived garbled so that the offer couldn't be made prior to the arrival of the Soviet guests. It was subsequently made by the Embassy. But even ten years later that loan had not been completely disbursed by any means.

The lesson of that one to me is this. Don't be unduly afraid of what your great enemies might offer in the way of aid. It is not necessarily going to swing a country into their camp. I took this lesson to heart many years later when I was in Laos as director of the AID Mission. A Soviet Embassy official came in to me and wanted a briefing on our AID program. I gave him a very frank briefing, it was all in the public domain. I turned to him and said, “We would be delighted to see you make a major contribution to the foreign exchange stabilization fund here.” I never saw an official show such instant fright and get out of my office so fast in my life as he did when I made that suggestion.

Q: One of the rules I always had on the finance of certain countries at least, was that you can't buy it, you are lucky if you can rent it for awhile.

MENDENHALL: I couldn't agree more, Tully.

There is another aspect of my service in Washington during that point that I think is somewhat worth noting. You know Henry Kissinger, when he was the National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, talked about the “conceptual” approach to foreign policy, as though this was something that he had invented—that we had never had it

in Washington history before. But as I look back in the late 1950s, we were following precisely that kind of approach in determining how we were going to conduct ourselves towards any specific country. We used to write lots of papers, first determining what are the U.S. interests with respect to that country, what are our objectives, and what policy should we be following to serve our interests and achieve our objectives. That is the "conceptual" approach as I understand it.

Q: Well, in many respect I found that the Eisenhower Administration for all the faults that we all know, was the best, most orderly in the determination of any time I have had any contact with.

MENDENHALL: This was that era. I think I would agree with you in retrospect.

May I just add a point while we are on this question of drafting of documents defining U.S. interests, objectives and policies. One of the things that used to annoy me at that time and continued to do so throughout my career, was certain Foreign Service officers, particularly desk officers, who used to like to put down as one of their objectives, "maintaining friendly relations with a foreign country." This meant that whenever a foreign country wanted something they were always inclined to give it to them in order to maintain friendly relations. I used to stoutly maintain that this could never be a U.S. interest or objective. It might under certain circumstances be a policy in order to achieve an objective, but there are times that you want to slam-bang the desk with a foreign country and be tough with them, whatever the effect may be on your relations. Maintenance of friendly relations in and of itself is not an objective, can never be in my judgment.

Q: Well, I think it is a systemic weakness of diplomacy very often that you are afraid to make anybody mad.

About this time you began to get in to the Vietnam business?

MENDENHALL: Yes. After two and a half years of economic work, the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, decided to switch me over to the Vietnam desk. I was very interested in this job. After all, the desk officer was then and I assume still is in the Department in many ways the principal focus of the U.S. towards the country concerned. So I was very happy to take on this assignment. I might say that at that time the Vietnam desk officer ran not only political matters, but all the economic matters with respect to his country. That was true of all the Indochina countries, it wasn't true of the other countries in Southeast Asia. I had handled Thai and Burmese economic matters but not political matters when I was in the economic unit of the office. But that economic unit did not handle economic matters, for some anomalous reason, with respect to the Indochina countries, the desk officers did. So I had responsibility for all aspects of U.S. policy and operations vis-a-vis Vietnam. At that time we had only one officer on the desk. I don't know what it is today, but I know before I retired, the Department had mushroomed and you had two or three desk officers dealing with countries.

There is one particular case I would like to raise in connection with my Vietnam Desk experience here in Washington. I think it is worth noting for posterity.

One of the principal things that arose during my tenure of about a year and a quarter on the desk, was approving the armaments and training of the civil guard in South Vietnam. The civil guard was a paramilitary organization similar to the Gendarmerie in France, which I thing probably was its predecessor, since the French had control in Indochina, or the Carabinieri in Italy. We in the United States don't have anything exactly like it. We have either military organizations or police organizations. We don't have something that stands sort of half way in between.

Well, the Vietnamese wanted because of the increasing insecurity in the country—the communists had already launched terrorists activities and assassinations in 1957-58—to improve the arms of the civil guard. Unfortunately, President of South Vietnam Diem's proposal was to give the civil guard tanks and artillery, which was ridiculous as they

would then be no different from the regular military. But there was an intermediate way of stepping up the quality of their arms and finally we got the Vietnamese government to agree to request the right kind of arms. The request came back to Washington through ICA, the predecessor of AID, which had a very strong police program.

It got here and the head of ICA said that this was not a regular police police. Which I think was quite right. He said, “This is not something which I think ICA should get involved.” The Department of Defense was not about to take it on either because the civil guard was not included in the approved military personnel ceilings for military aid which had been approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff for military aid programs in South Vietnam. So here we were falling in between the two stools. I kept pushing ICA on this and finally the head of the organization said he would do it if he got a direct order from John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State. So I drafted a direct order and Dulles signed it. ICA then agreed to undertake this program. As it turned out, the head of ICA was fundamentally right. ICA could not do a proper job of training and arming the civil guard. It was too big an organization. It was far bigger than any police program they had ever taken on. The civil guard consisted of about 50,000 people. This problem was never really resolved until about three years later after John Kennedy became President and had authorized a big increase in our military personnel and funds in Vietnam and finally induced the Department of Defense to take over the program. That was the really efficient way that it could be handled.

Q: Was there any question of it possibly be handled by CIA at that time?

MENDENHALL: No, because I think it was also too big to be handled by CIA.

One other thing that I did during that period was to handle Cambodia as an additional duty for a few weeks during the summer of 1958 while we were between Cambodia desk officers. I remember the office director said to me, “I am rather reluctant to intrust Cambodia to you because Vietnam and Cambodia are traditionally and historically at

loggerheads. You are the Vietnam desk officer and are apt to be rather prejudice in favor of Vietnam. But I don't have any alternative so you will have to take it on."

Well I handled it for a few weeks and was very pleased when my temporary service came to an end and he said to me, "You have treated this with very fair objectivity."

During that period Prince Sihanouk, who even then was the head of the Cambodian government, paid his first visit to Washington. It was not an official visit in the strict sense of that term where he is invited by the President and therefore President Eisenhower would have nothing to do with Sihanouk while he was here. He would not work him into his busy schedule. I understand the President has a busy schedule, but when people like Sihanouk, leaders of small countries, could go to Peking, or to Russia and get all the honors and attention from the heads of those governments, when they came here and didn't get the same thing, on a number of occasions, I think, it worked very substantially against our interests. We could not get President Eisenhower to agree to see Sihanouk, the best we could do was to get him received by the Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. Sihanouk had shortly before diplomatically recognized Communist China. That was at the time that the U.S. was holding a line very strongly against further diplomatic recognitions of that country. Sihanouk did it because there had been one of the periodic flaps in Vietnamese-Cambodian relations over a little border marker in the wilderness, which had been blown up to such proportions that he decided to resort for diplomatic support to Peking and recognize them diplomatically.

He arrived here with this very recently on his record. I accompanied him on his call on Walter Robertson, Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, whose meeting was almost completely a lecture to Sihanouk on the evils of communism—predictably the way Walter Robertson would handle it. Then I accompanied Sihanouk to his meeting with John Foster Dulles. Dulles had this reputation of being an anti-communist fire eater. This was the only time in my career that I was ever in Dulles' office and I have never forgotten the way he handled Sihanouk. He didn't take the Robertson approach at all. He took a

very philosophical approach in talking with him. He explained to him that we felt that the containment policy vis-a-vis the communist countries—both China and Russia at that time—was the one to follow because if we held that line over time those communist regimes might begin to change, to modify themselves. To be sure that is what eventually happened in both China and the Soviet Union. It is not the kind of attitude normally associated with Dulles, but he expressed that point of view and I think in view of what subsequently happened in 35 to 40 years of history it proved rather prescient. I think that is something that some of these anti-Dulles academics and writers might take into consideration some time. Of course, I don't know if this is even in the public record. It should be.

Q: I am not sure about this particular incident, but the idea has been discussed in the last few years by scholars, partly stimulated by Eleanor Dulles, perhaps.

MENDENHALL: I witnessed this and I can testify to it. I am sure I have a memorandum of this conversation between Sihanouk and Dulles in the official files.

Q: That is an extremely interesting point of view. Was there anybody else that you worked with in the Far Eastern Bureau besides Robertson that was particular impressive at the time, or that you remember as an influence.

MENDENHALL: Yes, I have already mentioned Howard Jones with whom I have worked considerably when he was economic deputy assistant secretary. Graham Parsons came in as the political deputy assistant secretary in the summer of 1958. Interestingly enough, Graham Parsons has probably told this himself in his oral history, but this is another incident of my diplomatic career which I have always remembered.

Walter Robertson, as you know was the key man in holding the line against Communist China in the 1950s. When Sihanouk recognized Communist China Robertson happened to be away and Graham Parsons was holding the fort there. Our ambassador in Cambodia, Carl Strom, had done everything possible, knowing the policy of the U.S. government, to try to prevent Sihanouk from proceeding with diplomatic recognition. His cables sounded

increasingly desperate as they came in. Then a copy of an outgoing cable came across my desk which Graham Parsons as the Acting Assistant Secretary had sent to Carl Strom in Phnom Penh. It was a cable which was very understanding of the anguish that an ambassador in a remote country knowing that U.S. policy vis-a-vis his country was in a sense going down the drain was going through. I happened to be in Parsons' office right after that. He turned to me and said, “I went through a similar kind of experience as ambassador to Laos. I knew how lonely and distant from Washington he feels under circumstances like that. He needs something that bolsters him in the way he is handling himself.” Again a human approach based on previous experience in the Foreign Service.

Q: I think that is as good a justification for a career Foreign Service as you could make. You went from there to Saigon.

MENDENHALL: Yes, I had been told when I became the desk officer that, if I handled that job properly and the ambassador in Vietnam, it was Elbridge Durbrow, agreed, that in the summer of 1959 when the assignment of the then political counselor in Saigon expired, I could succeed him. And that was the way it turned out.

I arrived with my family in Saigon in August of 1959 and served there for three years in what proved to be one of the two most challenging and interesting assignments of my career.

Q: What was the other?

MENDENHALL: Director of the AID Mission in Laos. Not as Ambassador to Madagascar which was less interesting.

In Vietnam I arrived when the security situation was already deteriorating in the countryside. In a few months, by January, 1960, the war, as I define it, actually started. In January, 1960 there was an attack on a regimental post of the South Vietnamese army by the Vietnamese communists and at the same time a reign of terror in an entire

province south of Saigon. This was a quantum leap in terms of the kind of violence that the communist had been engaged in, so I have always stated that the beginning of the war was January, 1960.

At the same time internal non-communist dissent with the way in which President Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, his right hand man, handled the government was increasing in Vietnam. These were our two great problems at that time and to remain so for a number of years. In September 1960, the Embassy, partly as a result of my pushing as political counselor, decided to try to put pressure on President Diem to appease his non-communist opponents by bringing some other men into the government and making some other changes and principally by getting rid of his brother Nhu, who was the focal point of disagreement. Nhu and his wife, Madame Nhu, were the two principal foci of the growing non-communist opposition in the country.

On Labor Day weekend, 1960, we drafted a message to Washington and got approval of a demarche to Diem on this point. The demarche was actually made when Graham Parsons, who was then the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, was visiting in Saigon. He and Ambassador Durbrow called on President Diem and the demarche was made. Our principal recommendation was that Diem get rid of Nhu, perhaps by sending him abroad as an ambassador—one of the classic devices for getting rid of a man who is unpopular. The whole demarche fell completely flat. Diem did nothing of what we recommended to him at that stage. Within two or three weeks, the first military coup attempt to overthrow him took place. This is what we were concerned about because we knew there was increasing disillusionment and dissent within the armed forces. The Vietnamese military were increasingly feeling that with the way in which Diem and Nhu ran the government war could not be won against the communists. These were non-communists, not communists at all.

I had been very much a pro-Diem man, even when we drafted these proposals to make a demarche to him. I wanted to see him get rid of Nhu, but was in favor of keeping Diem.

But after that first coup attempt when Diem showed that he had learned nothing—had made no changes whatsoever as a result of this first coup which had come within an ace of succeeding—it became increasingly obvious to me that Diem, himself, would have to go if we had any hope of winning the war.

Now that, of course, was the beginning of the time of great disagreement within the U.S. Mission about the U.S. policy towards Diem. Disagreement which came to a head two years later, which I shall reach in a moment. The mission was split right down the middle as was the U.S. government here in Washington over the policy towards Diem. My own judgment was that the conflict could not be won because of the utter disorganization of the way Diem and Nhu ran the government.

At the same time that this was going on the communist war in the field was expanding and it was decided within our mission that we ought to draw up a unified counter-insurgency plan and propose it to the South Vietnamese government. A country team subcommittee was created with membership from the Embassy; MAAG, which was a large military assistance mission; AID organization; CIA and USIA—five agencies represented on it. I, as political counselor, was chosen as the head of the team to draft the counter-insurgency plan. Much of the work on it was done by my military colleagues on the committee, with whom I had close and good personal working relations. After a couple of months we had the plan completed and submitted it to Washington for approval. The first, as far as I am aware, official act which John Kennedy as the new president in January 1961, took was to approve this plan personally, because we got a brief telegram from Washington—"Plan approved at highest level." That term was reserved for the President.

Then came the job of selling it to the South Vietnamese government. The ambassador turned to me and said, "I want you to conduct a briefing and negotiations with the number three man in the Vietnamese government." The number one being Diem and the number two being his brother Nhu, the number three being a man by the name of Thuan, who had two hats—he was the Chief of Staff of the Presidency and also the Secretary of Defense.

So I spent a week doing that. I had sessions every day with Thuan, accompanied by some of my military and other colleagues.

Thuan was one of the ablest Vietnamese I ever encountered. A man whose subsequent history was in a sense tragic. In 1963, he, like so many officials, finally broke with Diem and Nhu, himself. I believe he had to flee across the Cambodian border for his life. He escaped to Paris and never became involved again in affairs in Vietnam. I thought he was a great loss to that country because he had one of the best minds of anybody... And could organize and knew how to operate. I had very high regard for him.

After we concluded these sessions with Thuan, he had to present it to Diem. By that stage relations between Diem and our ambassador Durbrow were at a low level because Durbrow had on Washington's instructions, been pushing Diem on so many things. Diem was not about to concede anything to Durbrow. It was also known that Durbrow would soon be leaving on transfer and be replaced with another ambassador. Diem held out until Durbrow actually left.

Our DCM was on home leave and I, as political counselor, was Charg# for about five days. I think within 24 hours after Durbrow's departure, Thuan telephone me and said—by that time we had reduced the plan to two essential demands: 1) unity of command in the armed forces (which seems to me absolutely essential in conducting a war) and 2) a unified central intelligence organization. The Vietnam government under Diem had neither. There was no central focus of command in the military and there were all kinds of intelligence organizations. Thuan said that President Diem had agreed to those two points. Well, I cabled it off to Washington, but the sad upshot was that this proved, not to my surprise, to be an agreement only on paper. Diem never did implement these recommendations. He was so afraid of a military coup against him that he wanted to keep his own military and intelligence divided. My answer to that was that by doing that and thus failing to conduct the war against the communists effectively, you increase rather than decrease the chances for a coup. But Diem didn't see it that way.

At the same time, I had been Charg# about 24 hours, I received a NIACT or FLASH from Washington—"Lyndon Johnson, then Vice President, will be arriving within a few days on an official visit. Please get the concurrence of the Vietnamese government." The message was brought to me while I was at the main hotel in Saigon at a dinner the Vietnamese were giving for Senator Dodd from Connecticut. He had arrived that day and they were giving him a dinner. I got the message, I remember going out to the reception desk, and immediately telephoning Thuan. He said, "I will ask President Diem in the morning." I said, "Can you ask him tonight?" "No," he said, "I can't ask him tonight." Knowing how Washington, and particularly people like LBJ, could be impatient for immediate responses, and if you don't get them the guy who is in charge on the American side suffers. I had a rather sleepless night, but Thuan came through in the morning. I cabled it off to Washington. Then there was much back and forth. Johnson wanted to stay in a hotel and Diem wanted him to stay in the President Guest House. Diem finally won on that one—Johnson did concede.

Our new ambassador arrived about 24 hours prior to Johnson—Frederick "Fritz" Nolting. Nolting having had no experience in Southeast Asia before, let alone Vietnam, obviously knew nothing about the situation, so he let me handle the visit of the Vice President. I worked out all the scheduling with the Vietnamese government, all the activities. I remember being in the Vietnamese Guest House....this is something that I have always found remarkable, Tully. The first night that Johnson was there—he was on a six nation tour, Vietnam was the second stop. This was a man who six years earlier had had a severe heart attack when majority leader in the Senate. He slept one hour of that first night. I was in his room with Lady Bird Johnson sleeping in bed, Johnson on the telephone to Washington at 2 and 3 am in the morning. He slept one hour and had four more countries to go. Where that man got his energy I do not know.

Q: No politician could survive without it.

MENDENHALL: I have always prided myself on having a considerable energy, but at the end of that Vice Presidential visit I was more tired than I have ever been in my life and I didn't have four more countries to go.

Q: Joe, you were just expressing your total exhaustion after a Johnson visit, and I know what you are talking about.

MENDENHALL: I may add one more thing in respect to that visit. Johnson was there two nights and one full day and I remember on the afternoon of the full day the Vietnamese general who was in charge of Johnson's security turned to me and said, “Your Vice President has changed the itinerary so often during his time here that I can't possibly keep up with him. I haven't the slightest idea where he is going to be or what to do to protect him. I can only hope the communists are just as confused as I am with all these changes he has made. That is his only hope under the circumstances.”

Q: I never traveled with Johnson, but I did once travel with Nixon. Different personalities but...

MENDENHALL: Johnson was not the easiest man. Lady Bird is a real lady. Johnson was not an easy man at all.

Q: I saw a good deal of him during the days I was on the Hill.

MENDENHALL: As I indicated, our new ambassador, Fritz Nolting, arrived just before the Johnson visit. He came with instructions from President Kennedy to get along with President Diem. Nolting very quickly became convinced 1000 percent of the rightness of these instructions and was a total pro-Diem man. By that time I had reached the stage in my mind that Diem could not win the war against the communists and therefore it no longer served our interests for him to be in power. So there was this big disagreement between the ambassador and me, as political counselor, and it was well known.

Q: Who was the DCM at this time?

MENDENHALL: Francis Cunningham who was later succeeded by Bill Trueheart.

As a result of this disagreement, my influence and range of activities considerably declined. I indicated that I had been very close to the number three in the Vietnamese government, Mr. Thuan. He noticeably had cooled on me because he knew I no longer had the influence with Nolting as ambassador as I had when Durbrow was ambassador. A very interesting example of how power can wax and wane. So during my last year in Saigon I was considerably less involved, less prominent than I had been during the first two years.

I think for the sake of new Foreign Service officers, or even present Foreign Service officers in training, it is also interesting to recall some of my experiences under Nolting. We as political officers had very little contact with Vietnamese military officers even though we regarded them quite important in a political sense, because we felt that it might well endanger them personally if they were seen in contact with political officers. One night at a dinner party given by the director of the AID mission at which General Big Minh, who was prominent in Vietnamese history for 15 or 20 years, was present. I managed to get myself seated at a table for four with him and talked to him in the indirect fashion in which one always talked with Vietnamese about possible dissent with the government. There was never a direct conversation. One had to conduct it very carefully in terms of circumlocution, but if one had experience in dealing with the Vietnamese one knew exactly what they were saying. Well, I had this talk with Minh and it became clear as we had heard that Minh was becoming increasingly disillusioned as far as the government was concerned.

I went back to the Embassy the next morning and prepared a message on this. The ambassador saw it, but he, like his predecessor, had always insisted that everything going out be cleared by all agencies. He sent it over to the chief of MAAG, a Lt. General, for clearance. The latter came back and said, “Minh had never said anything to me like

this, I don't believe it." Well obviously he wasn't going to say this to the chief of MAAG because he knew the chief of MAAG was pro-Diem and any Vietnamese who valued his hide wouldn't talk like that to anyone pro-Diem. Everyone's views at the American mission were known by the Vietnamese—they knew whom to talk with and whom not to talk to. Subsequently the chief of MAAG became as anti-Diem as I did, but at this time he was still very much pro-Diem. As a result the ambassador canned my message. This was not the time when dissent messages could get out.

I also around the same time drafted an assessment on the so-called strategic hamlet program. This was a program that was pushed by the British general who had been prominent in the successful British anti-communist guerrilla campaign in Malaya and who by then was in Vietnam advising the Vietnamese. It was basically a good idea that was picked up by Ngo Dinh Nhu, the president's brother, who ran with it and executed it in utterly the wrong way so that it was not being effective. It was complete chaos. I drafted a frank assessment of how this program was going based on the views I was getting from my Vietnamese contacts. Since this disagreed with the assessment of the ambassador and the chief of MAAG, that message got canned too. It didn't get out either.

The other message of some significance which I did draft during that last year was, I think probably the first one that dealt with bombing North Vietnam. I was in favor of initiation of bombing for retaliatory reasons. I never see why your enemy should get away with raining destruction on you unless you rain some on him. I was not of the view that it would be decisive in any way, but I suggested targets and so on. I think this was the first time, as least as far as the U.S. Embassy was concerned, that any such message had gone out. Both the military and the ambassador approved of it and it did get out.

So after about a year of this my three year tour in Vietnam came to a close. In the summer of 1962 I came back to Washington. I had a three year assignment here. The first year I was a student at the National War College, which was just what I wanted at this stage of my career. I enjoyed it very much, learned a certain amount while I was there and always

look back on that year with considerable pleasure. I regard it as having been useful. My military colleagues, who of course were getting increasingly interested in Vietnam, were all fascinated with my experience there so I developed a very good rapport with them at that stage and found it a very satisfying experience. The Department deputy commandant at that point was Ambassador Winthrop Brown who had been our ambassador in Laos and I had a good relationship with him as well.

I looked around, as one does at the War College, before the year was up for assignments. I thought the next step in my career might be a small post DCM position, but I did not find open any which I thought were sufficiently of interest careerwise to make me want to pursue the possibility. I did get a request to come over to the Bureau of International Organizations for an interview as deputy director of the office of economic and social affairs—the office in which I had rejected at a lower level job earlier. I went through the interview and declined that job as it was not one that would interest me either professionally or careerwise.

Meanwhile, Roger Hilsman, who was then the Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs, indicated that he wanted me to come back into that Bureau. First as the so-called United Nations Advisor, which was a senior advisory slot, FSO-2 level, which had been held for many years by a lady by the name of Ruth Baker who executed Walter Robertson's anti-Communist China policy vis-a-vis the Bureau of International Organizations. He said that this would be an interim assignment because what the Department was planning to set up in many of the geographic bureaus was an office of regional affairs which would absorb several adviser posts that each bureau had maintained previously. He wanted me to be deputy director of that office.

So, I agreed to this assignment. I immediately found that virtually all I was doing, though it was regional, was Vietnam affairs, as Hilsman, himself, was at that stage. It was at that point that the only real footnote in history which I will ever have occurred. President Kennedy fairly often sent out special missions to Vietnam to assess the situation and

report back to him. The Secretary of Defense, Mr. McNamara, had gone out fairly often as well as other members of the government. In early September, this was at the height of the Buddhist crisis in Vietnam in September 1963, Kennedy had a meeting of the National Security Council, or whatever he called the equivalent of it, dealing with the crisis in Vietnam and decided that he would send General Krulak, a two star Marine Corps general and known as the Brute because he was so small...

Q: I knew him.

MENDENHALL: ...out on a special assessment mission. Krulak was known to be a 100 percent pro-Diem and was very close to McNamara, Secretary of Defense; and General Taylor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. At this NSC meeting Dean Rusk, Secretary of State, probably at the prodding of Roger Hilsman, suggested to President Kennedy that the State Department should also send a representative. Hilsman, himself, was anti-Diem so he would have liked to get somebody in to balance Krulak's view. After he got back he asked me if I would be willing to go. I said, “Sure.” He called Dean Rusk who said, “Mendenhall's anti-Diem views are so well known maybe we should try to get somebody else.” Hilsman said, “I don't have anybody else. I still think we should send him.” And Dean Rusk agreed. This was about 11 o'clock in the morning. Hilsman said to me, “The helicopter is leaving the Pentagon for Andrews Field at 1 o'clock.” I said, “Well, I need both money and to pack some clothes.” He said, “Well, I will call your wife and tell her to go cash a check and get some money while you go home to get some clothes.” This was probably the only time in history that an Assistant Secretary called and told a wife of a Foreign Service officer to go cash a check.

I managed to reach the helipad at the Pentagon in time to get on the helicopter with Brute Krulak. We went to Andrews Field, got in a plane and took off for Okinawa. We arrived Saturday evening in Okinawa to be informed that there was a curfew at the airport in Saigon. That we couldn't get in before 6 am. So we had a few hours to kill in Okinawa. We

went to the Saturday night dance at the Officers Club and I tried to get a little sleep before we got on the airplane again. We arrived in Saigon about 6 am.

The first thing I did in Saigon was to get together with Henry Cabot Lodge, who was the ambassador, who also knew my views—his and mine were pretty similar. Krulak and I separated completely. Krulak, I knew, would have everything laid on by all the resources of the military. He could get around the country anywhere he wanted. The only thing the poor Embassy had was the Air Attach#'s aircraft which was a slow moving propeller job. So Lodge arranged for me to have that aircraft, which took four hours to fly up to Hue and Da Nang. I knew that Krulak would come back here and say “Well, I have been in x many number of provinces. I know the situation on the ground and the war is going excellently.” So I knew I had to get out into the countryside in order to counter balance his view and I got up to Hue and Da Nang. I stayed overnight and talked to people up there. Came back to Saigon where I saw a few old Vietnamese friends whose judgment I knew I could trust. At that time there was a virtual reign of terror in Saigon. Bill Trueheart, the DCM, invited my old friend, the number two in the Foreign Office, for lunch and told me it was even dangerous for him to come to a lunch at an American Embassy official's house. The fact he is coming and is an old friend and knows you indicates that he is willing to brave the situation even though it is personally dangerous to him. The situation had deteriorated to that extent in Saigon. Americans, including Trueheart, himself, were on an assassination list—not of the communists, but of the Vietnamese government because of the pressure we were putting on Diem and Nhu.

I saw what the situation was both out in the field and in Saigon. Thirty-six hours after we landed, Krulak and I were back on the airplane headed back to Washington. We left Washington, Friday afternoon and were back here by Tuesday morning at 6 am and by 10 am we were both in the Cabinet room at the White House reporting to the President and the National Security Council. We gave very diametrically opposite views on the situation in Vietnam politically and as far as the war was going. When we finished, President Kennedy turned to each of us and made that remark which has been so often reported,

“You were both in the same country weren't you?” This is what got into so many books—my small footnote to history.Fortunately on the airplane we had brought back with us two officials from the U.S. mission whose tours were up. One was the director of USIS, John Mecklin, and the other was an AID official by the name of Rufus Phillips, who had been running the AID program in the provinces. Both of them supported my point of view at the meeting with the President. Phillips, in particular, lent considerable credibility to my point of view because of the kind of assignment he was on—he knew the area and the situation in the countryside very well. I might say that at that meeting with Kennedy and his NSC, Fritz Nolting, who had just been replaced as ambassador by Henry Cabot Lodge, was present. He immediately tried to impugn my credibility before the President. The man who sprang to my defense was no less than McGeorge Bundy, the National Security Advisor.

Q: But you stood up under all this...

MENDENHALL: At that meeting, though, I learned subsequently, that I totally alienated the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the point that the next time I went to the White House for an NSC meeting on Vietnam, I went with Alex Johnson, who said, “Don't open your mouth at this meeting.” Alex was then responsible for liaison with the Department of Defense. I now know he was getting this kind of line from McNamara and Maxwell Taylor.

As a matter of fact this had repercussions on me and my assignment and career later which I will get into in just a few minutes. One doesn't alienate some of the great powers in Washington without consequences as you well know.

Q: You have to wait quite a while for a change in personnel. By this time were you Chairman of the Vietnam Working Group?

MENDENHALL: No, not yet. I was still Deputy Director of Regional Affairs for the Far East. The next event of significance in my job and career came at the end of October, 1963. It was known in Washington on the basis of cable reporting that there could be a military

coup in Saigon. At that stage we were mounting a 24-hour watch in the Operations Center. I happened to be on all night duty the night the coup took place. I saw the first messages that came in to the Operations Center. As soon as I saw them I got on the telephone. I awakened the Secretary of State, Mr. Rusk, the Secretary of Defense, Mr. McNamara, and the National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy. I asked if he wanted me to call the President. He said, “I will take care of that.” They got their first word through me of the fact that the coup was then in progress.

Everybody, I think, knows the outcome of that coup. It was successful, but within about 24 hours after the coup had ended, Diem and his brother Nhu were slain, assassinated, by military officers. It was General Big Minh who took over the government with two of his colleagues. Whether these assassinations were done with his knowledge I really don't know. I for a long time thought it probably was done by some military officer on the spur of the moment. But I have seen books and articles which indicate that Minh was responsible for it. I just don't know.

That, of course, was a traumatic experience for the Administration because they had no anticipation that Diem and Nhu would be assassinated. It was thought that they would be exiled. If one wants to look at this in a realpolitik manner, it probably from that standpoint was better in the end that they were eliminated. This wouldn't be a very popular point of view to express in the United States at all, but Diem and Nhu would have constantly plotted their return and added enormous complications to the situation.

Well, what happened in Vietnam after that unfortunately was a series of coups. We had two years of political chaos which did nothing for Mendenhall's political reputation because I had been in favor of replacement of Diem. But eventually General Thieu took over the government in 1965. I believe, although one can make a very good case that the coup against Diem was a disaster because of the subsequent chaos, over the longer run it was the wiser thing because I think Thieu governed Vietnam more effectively and with better organization than Diem and Nhu did and certainly permitted closer collaboration

with us Americans than Diem and Nhu would have. It was through that kind of close, integrated, cooperative Vietnamese-American effort that we finally succeeded in the counter-insurgency pacification program. As I said I was responsible for the first counter-insurgency plan which I know fell far short of the kind of effort which after many years of experimentation we finally devised in Vietnam by 1967, which succeeded in eventually winning the guerilla war in that country.

Now this is something I would like to stress. Many Americans, even many who were for the war, do not understand what actually happened in Vietnam. We were losing the guerilla war for a long time, but from 1967 on we and the South Vietnamese organized ourselves properly to win that war which was won by 1970 or 71. South Vietnam was eventually defeated not in the guerilla war but in a straight conventional conflict after we had withdrawn our forces and the Congress had cut back very greatly on the amount of aid going to Vietnam. As the general who led the Vietnamese communist forces in the final great push which took central Vietnam and eventually succeeded in taking Saigon said, “The South Vietnamese wound up fighting a poor man's war. We were better equipped than they were.”—because the Congress had cut back so much on military assistance to Vietnam. For the sake of the United States in the future, we should understand that we did win the guerilla conflict but we and the South Vietnamese lost the one where we should have won, the conventional war.

Q: I think a good deal of that is now coming out from others too, as well as yourself. It will be a long time before we have this history totally organized.

MENDENHALL: Tully, I might go in to one other thing with respect to Vietnam before I leave that subject—you can see it is one that interests me very greatly. That is the upheaval within the Department over responsibility for Vietnam. I think this is something that would interest Foreign Service officers.

I have indicated that Roger Hilsman who was the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs was also a man who thought that in the early stages of the war the Department of Defense was not conducting our part of the war properly. That we should be putting much more emphasis on anti-guerilla activities rather than the conventional war at that stage. Hilsman was influenced by the fact that during World War II he had worked in anti-guerilla units in Burma so his personal experience had influenced him greatly. Hilsman made no bones either within the government or talking with the press about how he thought the war should be conducted. He and McNamara were totally at loggerheads. McNamara, of course, being the more senior official, met along with the Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor every Tuesday with the President at lunch to talk about Vietnam. McNamara's attitude towards Hilsman was such that the Secretary of State had to agree in February, 1964 to remove the responsibility from Vietnam from Hilsman as Assistant Secretary, put it in a special unit attached directly to the Secretary's office. I was not chosen to head that even thought I was director of the Vietnam Working Group because it was also known that my relations with McNamara were not good.

Bill Sullivan, who was then special assistant to Averell Harriman, the Under Secretary, was chosen to head the unit. I was moved in under my good friend Bill, and a lot of other officers from various Departments were added until we had an integrated government-wide working group under Bill dealing with Vietnam. It worked all right but there wasn't really enough for both Bill and me to do so I decided that after a few months I ought to be looking for some other assignments.

Meanwhile Hilsman had resigned because in addition to the blow of responsibility for Vietnam being removed from him, there was a decision to send a special emissary to Cambodia to deal with Sihanouk over the situation in Cambodia and instead of Hilsman being chosen somebody else was and it was the last blow as far as Hilsman was concerned. I don't think you find this in Hilsman's book as the reason for his resignation, but these two things together I think are what led to Hilsman's resignation.

Hilsman was replaced by Bill Bundy, who had been the Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs in the Department of Defense. He was very close to McNamara and obviously a man who could get along with McNamara when he came to the State Department.

Q: It was, however, Mac Bundy who had defended you before.

MENDENHALL: Right, they were brothers.

Bill Bundy asked me whether I would come back into the Bureau of East Asian Affairs to be the director of regional affairs. I had been deputy director. I agreed to do it and served about a year in that capacity. I can't say that year was one in which I did anything of very great significance. One thing I do remember doing there was to send a memorandum to Bill Bundy in the summer of '64, July, I think, when we got the first intelligence that North Vietnamese military individuals and subsequently units were being infiltrated from North Vietnam into South Vietnam. Prior to that time the North had always infiltrated southerners who had been taken to the North in 1954 at the time of the division of the country into the two zones—North and South. They had exhausted that supply and were beginning to infiltrate northerners. That to me represented a change in the nature of the war. The North Vietnamese had always tried to portray that this was a civil war within South Vietnam of the southerners against their government and they had had some success up to that point because they had been using southern communists including those who had been taken north in '54 and retrained and armed up there. Having exhausted that supply they began to send in first individuals from the North Vietnamese armed forces and then units. It is pretty easy for a Vietnamese to determine who is from the south and who is from the north by accent. They know immediately where a Vietnamese comes from. So on the basis of that I sent Bundy a memorandum recommending that what we should do to win the conflict in my judgment was to send American military forces to Vietnam. At that point Johnson had not made the decision to send military units. We had a lot of American advisors, but no military units as such. I suggested just off the top of my head about three divisions to

establish a barrier along the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam and all the way across Laos to Savannakh#t on the Mekong River to cut off to the maximum extent possible the infiltration of men and supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam —the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Preventing the North from sending down northerners I thought was increasingly important. I have remained of that judgment ever since: that is, in terms of strategy we, the US, followed the wrong one in trying to apply the attrition strategy which had been successful in World War II in the Vietnam situation. What we were dealing with in the case of Vietnam was what was in effect a sanctuary in North Vietnam. Certainly we bombed them, but we had no intentions of sending ground forces in because of our experience in Korea. So in effect the North Vietnamese had a sanctuary in North Vietnam and in Laos. We bombed the Ho Chi Minh Trail a lot, but you cannot interdict by bombing alone. This may be relevant to Iraq today, I do not know. You have to do it on the ground.

So my strategy was to try to reduce to the maximum extent possible the constant flow of replacements. With an attrition strategy you cannot hope to win it if what you attrite is always being replaced by new men and new equipment and that was what the North Vietnamese did since they were operating from what in effect was essentially a sanctuary.

So as early as '64 I recommended this as the strategy to be followed in the war. Obviously we know that that strategy was never adopted by the United States. There are books published since the war, including one by a four-star general, Bruce Palmer, which indicates that he thinks this kind of strategy should have been followed as well. We also have another Foreign Service officer who recently published a book to this effect—Norman Hannah. His book is A Key To Failure, I think. The South Vietnamese Chief of Staff, General Cao Van Vien, also recommended this approach. But I don't think it was ever very seriously considered within the United States government. It certainly was never adopted. Maybe I should not say never taken seriously. I think at one point the Joint Chiefs of Staff even suggested this, but it was never adopted by McNamara or President Johnson—the

two men who in my mind are primarily responsible for the outcome of the war in Vietnam for failing to adopt the proper strategy.

Q: However, general American psychology in the long run is what cost us the war.

MENDENHALL: Yes, but if we had adopted this strategy, Tully, we wouldn't have lost American public opinion. As General Palmer said, we would not have had to put in nearly so many in the way of forces and our casualties would have been substantially less. These were the two things that turned around the views of the American public.

Right at the moment we see this factor operating in the case of the war against Iraq. The Administration is following the path of the air war as long as possible because it keeps the casualties down and therefore they don't risk a reversal of public opinion.

Q: Well, does this get you pretty much through...?

MENDENHALL: Let me just say a couple of things. One of the interesting experiences I had during that period was to attend a meeting at the Foreign Minister level of the SEATO Council—the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, which never began to amount to the same thing that NATO did in Europe and was eventually dissolved. But at that time there were annual meetings at the Foreign Minister level and I attended one at which Mr. Bhutto, then the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, subsequently the Prime Minister and President, was present. Bhutto, though Pakistan was a member of SEATO, was as anti-American in the views that he expressed at that council meeting as anybody I have ever seen. My view of him was formed very much on the basis of how he conducted himself at that meeting. Pakistan's foreign policy, of course, has always been guided in large measure by its view towards India. In more recent years, Afghanistan has played a very important role in determining Pakistan's foreign policy. But then at that time Pakistan was being very cozy with Communist China and therefore Bhutto was very anti-American. Subsequently, when he became Prime Minister some years later, I think he modified those views and moved to

a considerable degree towards a pro-American position. I think his daughter now is quite pro-American I understand.

The other thing of some interest which I did as director of regional affairs was related to an Afro-Asian conference. We don't have these any longer today, but in the 60s following the first Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia, I think in 1955, there was considerable interest in this. The second Afro-Asian meeting was to be held in Algiers in April or May, 1965. Of course the U.S. would not be attending such a meeting in any official capacity, but I was going as a lobbyist to try to prevent whatever damage I could with respect to our cause in Vietnam.

I had made a swing through the Far East prior to that time talking to friendly governments, officials at foreign offices, about the meeting and urging attendance and doing what we could to hold our position. We knew we would be outvoted as there would be more radicals at that meeting than there would be friendly countries. We were trying to follow a policy of damage limitation as well as we could. I was on my way to the meeting and had arrived in Paris where I had to pick up a plane to Algiers when word came through that there had been a coup d'etat in Algeria and Ben Bella had been overthrown by Boumedienne.

I thought since it looked like the Afro-Asian meeting was going to proceed that the best thing was to go on down and adhere to our damage limitation policy. I got on the telephone to the embassies in Paris of various Far Eastern countries that I had visited to talk to them to urge them to proceed to attend. I was on the telephone with the Thai embassy talking to an official when all of a sudden the Thai Foreign Minister got on the other end, I had met him at the SEATO council meeting earlier, and he talked to me directly about it. He said he was uncertain whether to go and I urged him to go. He agreed to go. We all got down there and I tried to stay in the background as much as possible because it would have been counter productive to put myself forward as the American representative, but we had

these friendly countries who would be on the floor of the conference and we would do what we could.

The afternoon for the opening of the meeting arrived. Bill Porter was our ambassador in Algiers at that point. All the ambassadors were invited to the opening ceremony and he said he would take me along to the opening. We arrived at the door. The Algerian officials greeted him, he had credentials to get in, and I started in but was told I was not permitted in. Porter turned to him and said, “But he is my interpreter, I have to have him.” Well, Porter was one of the best linguists in the Foreign Service. The Algerians said, “Oh, but Mr. Ambassador you don't....” “Oh, yes I actually do...so you come with me.” So he pulled me through and I went right through. The Algerians were looking sort of agape at the way that he got me through. Out of sight of the officials he turned to me and said, “Now you are on your own, I can't take you into the seat.” I started down a corridor and another security official challenged me. I had no credentials at all. He said I would have to get out of there. At that moment his attention was diverted so I dived into a loge box and stayed there monitoring. I was right in there where I could see everything. The meeting opened and within five minutes was adjourned by the Algerians and never resumed. I have never known exactly why the Algerians did that, but from our standpoint it was the best outcome of the meeting, because we couldn't have won if the meeting had proceeded. My friends from other embassies whom I had urged to attend were a little annoyed. They felt their dignity had been compromised by this denouement. No, they were not annoyed with me, they were annoyed with the Algerians. So it turned out all right.

Q: This is an interview with Ambassador Joseph Mendenhall continued after a three-day break at DACOR Bacon House on February 14, 1991. This is side B of tape 2 of the interview.

Ambassador Mendenhall, Joe, when we finished the other day you were just describing your experiences at the Afro-Asian Conference in Algiers which lasted five minutes, I think you said, but the work up to it was quite heavy. That was part of your duties as Director of

Regional Affairs in the FE Bureau. Was there anything else that happened on that job you wish to relate?

MENDENHALL: I think we have covered the items.

Q: Well, then on to Laos. How did that assignment come about?

MENDENHALL: This brings us to the summer of 1965 when my family decided after three years in the States it wanted to taste something foreign so we decided to take a brief summer vacation in the province of Quebec which is a bit different from the Anglo-Saxon atmosphere. I had fully expected to serve another year in Washington completing a four-year tour, but the day I arrived back from that vacation, Bill Bundy, the Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs called me in and said that Bill Sullivan, our ambassador to Laos, wanted me to come out to Laos to operate the AID Mission for him. I asked Bill for 24 hours to speak to my wife and think it over. Came back the next day and said, “Yes,” and within a few weeks we were on our way out to Laos.

That, indeed, proved to be the most interesting and challenging assignment of my entire career. The mission in Laos was the second biggest in the world, after Vietnam. We had about 500 Americans working for me in the AID Mission, 600 third-country nationals and 2,000 Lao employees. We were the largest employer of labor in Laos after the Lao government. In financial terms our program was also extremely large. We had a $50 million a year economic aid program and because of provisions of the Geneva Accords of 1962, the economic aid mission also operated the military aid program, which amounted to $150 million dollars a year. Those two programs combined at $200 million a year would be about a billion dollars a year in terms of dollars today.

We had an extremely sizeable program. I had no idea when I went out there whether I was a manager or not, one doesn't get too many opportunities in the Foreign Service at a

lower level to determine whether one has managerial capacity or not. But I found that I did possess it. I ran that Mission and enjoyed it very much for the three years I was there.

The program which we operated was three-pronged. First we supported the war effort. As you know, Tully, Laos was in many ways an integral part of the conflict in Vietnam and in the AID Mission we functioned very closely with CIA in support of the so-called secret war up in northeastern Laos against the North Vietnamese communists and the Pathet Lao, the Lao communists, operating in that area. We had a very large refugee program always numbering at least 100,000. As soon as we would get some off the rolls by resettling them, additional ones would be generated, so we constantly had about that number of refugees that we were supporting around the provinces.

The second prong of our program was the support of the economic stability of the country of Lao. We did that by subsidizing certain essential imports for the country and by operating a foreign exchange fund at a level which enabled the Lao currency to be completely convertible. That is a pretty remarkable thing in the case of a small underdeveloped country like Laos, but it did mean a very substantial input of foreign assistance in order to keep the Lao currency, the kip, convertible. There were five countries which participated in the foreign exchange fund which supported the kip, but the United States, just as it is today in the war in Iraq, was overwhelmingly the principal architect and contributor to this program.

The third prong of our AID program was economic development. It was one which had not been emphasized very greatly before my arrival. I tried to put as much emphasis on it as I could because I thought we ought to do whatever we could in Laos in order to begin to move this country towards a self-sustaining basis. Laos had imports of about $50 million and exports of about $1 million a year so you can see that we had a long way to go if we were ever to achieve that objective. The best one could hope for was to begin to whittle down this immense deficit in the Lao balance of payments.

As I wrote in one of the Congressional presentations in support of AID appropriations in 1967, we really were trying to move Laos from the 12th century to the 19th century, not into the 20th century. Laos was essentially still very much a feudal country; very much underdeveloped. When the French were in control of Indochina they did a certain amount in Vietnam and a lesser amount in Cambodia and did virtually nothing to develop Laos, except for the construction of a few roads, which by the time I was there had almost totally disintegrated. In fact some of them had completely reverted to jungle—utterly impassible.

As far as roads were concerned in our program and to indicate that we were not trying to move into the 20th century, we never paved roads when we upgraded them. We stabilized them in a way that we hoped would hold up during the torrential monsoon rains, but they were not something on which we spent a lot of money because the amount of traffic in Laos would not have required it at all.

We also in our economic development activities did our best to try to put Laos back on a self-supporting basis as far as rice production was concerned. Rice is the staple food in Laos. The country at one time had been completely self-supporting, at a rather low level, but nonetheless self-supporting. I felt what we should try to do was to increase the production of rice and get them back up as nearly as we could to sustaining themselves. One of the problems was that so many of the Lao males had been taken off for military operations that there were not very many people left on the farms to operate them except for women. Actually in rice culture women can do everything except to plow with water buffaloes. You usually need a male to do that, but all the rest of the work they could do.

Q: Is this a cultural thing or a physical thing?

MENDENHALL: A physical thing. Even though the water buffalo is a docile animal it is too difficult for a woman to handle along with a plow which they are holding on to.

This was the time when the so-called new miracle rice was being developed in the Philippines at an experimental station. This is something that spread throughout much of Asia subsequently. We introduced it into Laos at that time. We also began to encourage the farmers to use fertilizer and insecticides. We developed small irrigation projects, and I do mean small. These often were little self-help dams built on streams. We would furnish the materials and the peasants would supply the labor to build these little dams. We also encouraged the Lao to go in to some extent for double cropping. During the dry season, traditionally it was impossible to put into the ground a second crop of rice, but with irrigation it was possible to begin to develop a certain amount of second cropping.

This program which I spent a great deal of time on was beginning to show some signs of progress by the time I left—not great, but we were moving towards our objective. I don't know what happened later. I am sure after the communists took over in 1975 everything went to pot, but we did what we could during the time we were there.

It was interesting that in operating the AID program in Laos, the AID Mission director there probably had as much if not more power than an AID Mission director anywhere else in the world and in some respects even than in Vietnam at that stage. I worked with all of the Ministers of the Lao government except the Minister of Religious Affairs, which was a bit outside my domain. I found it necessary since the Lao were not particularly energetic even at the ministerial level, to have our mission prepare a proposed program each year in each of the functional fields—education, health, public works, etc. Then we would take this program and I would sit down with the minister who was the head of that department, discuss it with him and get his concurrence. Sometimes he had a few suggestions, but by and large they left it up to the AID Mission to work out the program. It meant a constant series of negotiations all conducted in French—so as a result of that my French came out of Laos far better than it had ever been before.

Q: With a Laotian accent?

MENDENHALL: Actually the Lao spoke very good French because a lot of the older ones had been educated in the French educational system. They used to criticize my accent. There was no university in Lao and one had to use French because there was only one Lao who had been to an American university. A young man who was very capable and worked in one of the ministries with us. One absolutely had to speak French, there was no English in Laos.

When I served in Vietnam a few years earlier, the Vietnamese had been predominantly French speakers, but I think by the time I served in Laos, the Americans were so ubiquitous in Vietnam that by that time a lot of Vietnamese were speaking English. But that was not true of Laos at all.

To indicate the extent of the AID Mission's activity in that country, in 1966, when one of the great floods of the Mekong occurred and the capital city of Vientiane was under about a meter of water for almost three weeks, it and the surrounding area, the operations of the Lao government totally fell apart. We in the AID Mission did everything to operate the services of that government. We fed the city. We had rice for our refugee program and were able to use it to feed the people of Vientiane. I decided that on that score since these people were not destitute, we did not need to give away the rice as we did to the refugees, that we would sell it to them. So we set up distribution points around the city and sold rice every day to the people. At the end of the day, because in Lao currency there was no bank note larger than the equivalent of $2 my staff would come back with many, many burlap bags full of Lao kip, because they had sold many tons of rice during the day at these distribution points. We also brought in water purification systems from the American military because the water was contaminated in the city. We vaccinated about 80,000 people which was about two thirds of the total population of Vientiane. We even set up a boat transportation system because there were some high points in the city that were not under water but to get from one to another one had to have little boats. We even operated

the boat system to get people around. So in effect we operated that city completely for about three weeks.

Q: How much of this organization to do all this was existing when you went there or was there nothing?

MENDENHALL: No, no, the organization was in place when I arrived. I did not have to set up the organization.

It was fortunate that I did take the decision on my own to sell the rice to the population of the city, because after the flood was over the Lao government turned to me and said, “Look, to the extent that our streets were paved here in the city they have totally disintegrated as a result of the flood. Will you repave my streets?” Well, I took the $20,000 which we had gotten for the sale of rice and used that to pave the streets.

Now there is an interesting parallel to that. Oliver North took the money from the sale of arms to Iran to support the Contras in Nicaragua and has been subjected to all kinds of criticism for it. I suppose in a sense I did the same thing because I didn't turn that $20,000 back into the treasury but used it for a good purpose in Laos. We would have had to come through with the money anyway, we just avoided a lot of bureaucracy by doing this.

This is an example of the kind of power and authority which the AID Mission director in Laos either possessed or took.

Another example of this was that within our mission we possessed a complete construction capability. I don't think even the AID Mission in Vietnam had that item. When they decided on a project they always had to contract with an outside contractor. We had this right within our mission operated by an old American construction man. As a matter of fact the first decision I ever took with respect to the AID Mission Laos was here in Washington before I even got there. This particular man was without an engineering degree and I found right after I had been nominated as AID Mission director

that the public works people in AID Washington wanted to replace him with a man with an engineering degree. I had been told that he had been doing a good job. He was here in Washington worrying about his future and came up to me and laid out his case. I said, “Well, I understand you are doing a good job. If you continue to I am going to support and keep you.” I overruled the public works people here in AID and indeed he proved a superbly efficient individual, degree or no degree.

Q: Self taught contractor.

MENDENHALL: He was self taught. In Laos in the AID Mission we possessed the authority to initiate and approve construction projects ourselves. In the Marshall Plan days I know that didn't exist in any aid mission. I am not sure it existed in Vietnam. All I had to do was to pick up a telephone and tell Tom Cole, who headed the public works division, that I wanted him to build a road here or an airport there, and he would do it.

Again an example, in the great flood of 1966, which I mentioned a moment ago, the chief airport up in northwestern Laos at Ban Houei Sai used for both civilian and military purposes, was swept away by the flood. It was very essential, for military as well as other reasons, to get another airport up there. So as soon as the flood subsided, I got hold of Cole and said, “You go up there and have your people build an airport.” In six weeks we had a new airport ready up there capable of taking jets. It wasn't paved, but the reason it could take jets was because right in the middle of the runway there was a slope down and because of that slope you could get enough runway for a jet to take off. He did this in six weeks.

Another example, we have no road at all to northeastern Laos where so many of our activities together with those of the CIA took place. Everything that went to northeastern Laos had to go in by air which was extremely expensive. So I decided that we ought to try to build a road up there. I had to go to get approval from the Prime Minister because a road into the northeast for us to get things in could enable the communists if they

conducted an offensive to come down that road. He agreed. What Tom Cole did was to simply take an airplane, fly over the jungle and try to select his road route from the air. It was all jungle and mountainous terrain all the way—about 40 or 50 miles. By the time I left he had the project underway and I think it did get completed subsequently.

But here again was a project which we undertook totally on our own in Laos without any reference to Washington for approval or consent. I think this authority that didn't exist anywhere else was one of the things that made the job so fascinating.

Q: Did this keep on as far as you know as long as we were there?

MENDENHALL: I would assume so, I think so.

I mentioned that we had to fly everything up into northeastern Laos. I found when I arrived in Laos in 1965 that one fifth of our total economic aid budget of $50 million a year was going to pay for air costs simply to move people and things around the country by air. About $9 million of $50 million was going for that purpose. I was appalled by that, to think that we were spending so much of our aid money simply for air transportation. I decided that one of the first things I was going to do was to try to get that down. Well in my three years there we did succeed in cutting those air costs in half. We got them down from nine to about four and a half million by instituting rigid controls over the use of aircraft for the movement of people and things. Prior to that time anybody who had a thought ran out to get a plane or helicopter. We had 20 helicopters and 40 fixed-wing aircraft under contract to the AID Mission.

Q: Was this Air America?

MENDENHALL: This was Air America and Continental Airlines. That's an interesting story. I found when I got there that the AID Mission had contracted with Continental for 2 C-130 transport planes. These are very big planes and I found there were only two airports in Laos capable of accommodating those planes. We were paying $1000 an hour for

operating them and were responsible to Continental for a fixed number of hours per month whether we used them or not. This immediately rang bells in my mind as to whether this was justified. I found after a month that it was not at all justified so we told Continental, we had the option after a month of saying take them back, to take them back. Continental had purchased those planes specifically for the operation of Laos not expecting this outcome. This didn't make me very popular with Continental Airlines. Indeed, I found in subsequent negotiations over reducing air costs that the man Continental sent out to supervise these negotiations wouldn't even talk to me—that happened to be Pierre Salinger who had been the press spokesman for President Kennedy, subsequently he ran unsuccessfully for the Senate in California and was then a Vice President of Continental. On his first visit he was very cordial, but on his second visit when he saw how we were squeezing down what we were paying to Continental he was so annoyed with me he wouldn't even come around and talk with me at all. I fortunately had an excellent man in my controller who conducted the negotiations with Continental and got our costs very substantially reduced with them.

This, Tully, was actually one of several fights that I had while AID Director in Laos in order to reduce costs that I didn't feel were justified. I had one battle with our CIA station chief over war operations. I was all in favor of what CIA was doing so long as it seemed to me to serve a specific purpose. But to conduct an operation for the sake of an operation didn't seem to me to be justified, particularly when it always generated additional refugees for the AID Mission to support.

One operation I remember that I objected to after it took place because I hadn't known about it before hand, was one up in northwestern Laos, up near the Chinese frontier which generated a certain number of refugees for us to support. This annoyed me and I also felt that it was not particularly wise politically to conduct operations so close to the Chinese border because it risked a reaction from the Communist Chinese regime.

But that was a minor thing compared with another battle I had with him with respect to northeastern Laos. In that area every year during the wet season the Meo guerilla forces,

the ones supported by CIA and the Aid Mission, would conduct operations against the communists and make substantial advances. Then would come the dry season when the communists would mount their offensive against them and recover a good deal of that territory. The third year I was there, General Vang Pao, the very capable Meo general who was in charge up there told my man up in northeastern Laos that because of the heavy casualties which the Meo had been taking in these campaigns and the fact that it had been simply back and forth that he was not particularly in favor of an offensive the third year. Well, in a country team meeting, the CIA station chief said he was not getting that kind of report from his man up in northeastern Laos. He said that Vang Pao was all gung-ho to carry on as they had done in preceding years. So we had a big go round over that. The Ambassador decided to send us all up with the DCM to talk directly with Vang Pao. Well, this unfortunately put Vang Pao on the spot because he was drawing support from both CIA and AID and he didn't want to alienate either. So all he did was temporize, but the result was that the offensive that was carried on was substantially reduced in size.

Q: Who was the DCM?

MENDENHALL: Bob Hurwitch at that time.

I would like to mention something about the AID representative up in northeastern Laos. He was a very unique individual. He was an old Indiana dirt farmer who had lost his wife and in his early 50s decided that he would leave his farm and join the International Voluntary Service which was a private equivalent of the Peace Corps. He was sent off to Laos to work up in northeastern Laos and learned Meo. He was so successful in his liaison with the Meo that after a year or so with IVS he was taken on by AID as our representative up there. He was a completely uneducated man who had no idea of what English grammar was at all. As a matter of fact one summer my oldest daughter went up to serve as his secretary for a week. I told her to clean up the grammar before she sent his reports down to the Mission. He was one of the most remarkably effective individuals in working with backward peoples that I ever encountered in my life. Truly fantastic. He stayed in

Laos quite a number of years. He died shortly after Laos fell to the communists. A very interesting fellow known as Pop Buell. There were a lot of newspaper articles on him at the time he was serving there because he was such a colorful individual.

I also had a big battle with Embassy Bangkok over the cost of transportation through Thailand. Everything that came into Laos had to be transported by land up through Thailand. There was a Thai government organization with participation by several Thai generals which operated the outfit that controlled the transportation and they were gouging us as far as costs were concerned. So I started putting up a big battle about that and generated a terrific reaction against me, not the Thai, on the part of the Embassy in Bangkok. Graham Martin was then the ambassador, but it was his economic minister who came down very virulently against me on this and even started accusing me of shenanigans upon which Bill Sullivan, our ambassador, rose in my defense and cables were flying hot and heavy between Bangkok and Vientiane. The upshot of that was that we did get some reduction in costs, not as much as we should have, but there was at least partial success in that battle.

Then I had another battle, this time with the Philippines. The AID Mission in Laos spent about a $1 million a year financing a contract with a Filipino organization known as Operation Brotherhood which manned several provincial hospitals we had built in Laos. About $200,000 of that $1 million went towards overhead in Manila and that raised a red flag in my mind. The main justification that was being used was training personnel to come to man these hospitals in Laos. Well, the Filipinos who were delighted to have a job in Laos seldom turned over so there wasn't much continued training involved, so I couldn't see why we needed to continue to send $200,000 out of our program to Manila. I think it was being used mainly to support the sanctimonious head of Operation Brotherhood who as soon as I started raising questions came over first to talk to me and then to threaten me that he was going to take this matter to the President of the Philippines with whom he was very close politically if I didn't back down. Well I didn't back down. He went back to Manila and the next person who came over was a personal emissary from the President of the

Philippines. I talked to him, explained the situation to him and he evidently accepted it and convinced the President to accept it because my position totally prevailed in that fight.

I did learn, however, that the White House staff who were dealing with the war in Vietnam were getting very concerned over the cables flying back and forth between Vientiane and Manila because they were afraid my effort to cut down on this money going to the Philippines might adversely affect Filipino participation in the war in Vietnam. You never know what repercussions you stir up in a battle of this sort.

Q: It is good to know somebody at the working level in the White House was screening the situation.

MENDENHALL: Another battle I had was an interesting one. In early 1968, the American Mission, that is the embassy, CIA, USIA, AID and Defense, were considering an increase in the salaries of the local Lao employees. I was very strongly opposed to it for this reason. We were by far the biggest employer of Lao labor among the agencies of the US Mission. I felt that if we agreed to an increase in salaries of local employees, it would induce the Lao government to raise salaries of their employees. Since anything they spent in their budget had an immediate impact on the money we had to contribute to the foreign exchange fund, I was opposed. The word got out to the Lao community that Mendenhall was the only American head of an agency who was opposed to the increase. While I was on a mission to southern Laos, an inspection mission, I learned my Lao employees had gone on strike. This was the first labor strike in the history of Laos. I came back and talked with the strike leaders, but they were persistent. Everybody else, including the ambassador, wanted to go ahead with this increase in the salaries, but I held out. There was a procedure in the regulations that if the ambassador and a head of one of the other US missions disagreed, the dispute could be submitted to Washington for decision. So Bill Sullivan and I both sent off our positions by cable to Washington. Bill Gaud who was then the head of AID went over and took it up with the number two man in the State Department, the Deputy Secretary, Katzenbach. Katzenbach listened to him and said,

“You tell Mendenhall I admire his guts but we have enough problems in Southeast Asia at this moment and I think we had better give in on this one.” This was the moment of the heavy communist TET offensive in Vietnam. So at least I got my case considered at top level here in Washington, but did not prevail in that. And I might say that the fact that I disagreed with Sullivan over this never affected our relations whatsoever. I give credit to Bill for that because some ambassadors would have held this against another head of US mission for insisting that this thing be taken to Washington.

Q: This time you were not really on the Embassy staff. You were an independent mission?

MENDENHALL: Well, I also concurrently held the role of economic counselor, but that amounted to nothing. The AID Mission job in Laos was a big job, the economic counselor was zero.

My final big battle in Laos was with the Lao government itself. In the early spring of 1968 one of the principal taxes collected by the Lao government—the bottom fell out of it. Laos was an entrepot for the gold trade. It allowed gold to be imported and exported freely, but taxed the exports. At that time the U.S. rigidly controlled gold here and held the price at $35 an ounce. The U.S. decided in the spring of 1968 to free the price of gold for commercial purposes. Well this cut the ground out from under this Lao entrepot trade and took away one of the principal sources of revenue for the government.

I felt that the Lao government would then come down on us for increased contributions for the foreign exchange fund because the budgetary deficit would be much bigger and would therefore generate more demand for foreign exchange. I insisted that they not only control their budget but reduce their budget eventually in order to prevent this. Well, this resulted in a big conflict between the Lao government and myself.

At one stage a mission from the International Monetary Fund came out to Laos to look over the situation. And though you know that IMF is supposed to be the bad boy in financial situations like this, since there were no IMF funds at stake in Laos, they weren't

about to be the bad boy. I was the one. So at a big session in the Prime Minister's office with the IMF team, the ambassadors of all the other countries contributing to the foreign exchange fund and our Charg# Bob Hurwitch, Bill Sullivan was on home leave at that point, and myself were present. I was the only one who spoke up for stern controls. This alienated the Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma.

I went off on home leave shortly after almost three years in Laos and to my consternation while I was here a cable came through from Hurwitch that the Prime Minister had asked that I not return to Laos. So in effect I was PNGed from Laos after three years there.

Q: It was probably time to go anyway.

MENDENHALL: Had Bill Sullivan been there this would never have gotten into the Washington channels. It would have been resolved in Laos, it wouldn't have been any problem. But our DCM, serving as Charg#, was rather jealous of my position in the US community there and with the Lao and therefore put up no fight at all with Souvanna Phouma when he asked that I not return.

The epilogue to this was that when Sullivan got back he did insist that I return to Laos for a proper farewell reception. He gave the reception for me to which all the Ministers of the Lao government except the Prime Minister came, which gave me a good send off despite the fact that I had been PNGed. Thus endeth my three year assignment to Laos which, in spite of what happened in the end, I still regard as the most fascinating and challenging assignment of my career.

Q: Well it certainly should have equipped you to run any large corporation in the country.

MENDENHALL: Then I came back to Washington and though I had not been very well supported by the Bureau for Far Eastern Affairs, AID fought for me as much as it could. AID asked me to stay on in their organization as the number two man in the Vietnam bureau. In 1967 Lyndon Johnson had insisted that the Vietnam operation in AID be set up

as a completely separate bureau equivalent to a continent, equivalent to Asia, Africa, etc. That bureau had rapidly expanded under a very able man, Jim Grant, and had between 400 and 500 employees here in Washington.

When I arrived in the summer of 1968, Lyndon Johnson who had been the instigator of that bureau was on the way out of his presidency, so Bill Gaud, the head of AID, said, “What I want you to concentrate on is cutting the staff of that bureau down substantially. In the course of the year and a half I was with the bureau I succeeded in cutting it in half. That doesn't render one very popular as you well know, Tully, and it wasn't a very easy thing to do because personnel who were about to lose jobs were inclined to get hold of their Congressman and one is involved in a lot of correspondence and discussion with members of Congress over personnel matters. But we did get it cut in half and I was rather gratified by it.

After I had been in the bureau for half a year, Jim Grant, the Assistant Administrator, the head of it, decided to leave the government and go to an important private job and I became his successor as head of the bureau for a year.

It was a very interesting year. You are an old Deputy Assistant Secretary for Congressional relations and one of the few Foreign Service officers I imagine who ever had extensive contact with Congress. My understanding is that besides the Bureau of Congressional Relations and those in the Management Bureau who deal with the budget of the Congress, the normal Foreign Service officer in the Department, even Assistant Secretaries, don't have all that much contact with members of Congress.

Q: Some, particularly in the Economic Bureau.

MENDENHALL: In AID, on the other hand, one is in touch with Congress almost all the time because the key principal function of the AID Bureau is to get money out of Congress.

Q: As I remember you had a delightful Congressman to deal with.

MENDENHALL: We did indeed. As a matter of fact the worst afternoon I think I ever passed in my life was with Congressman Passman of Louisiana who was the chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee dealing with AID appropriation. Passman had been in that chairmanship for about 15 years and knew his way around very extensively. But he had the habit of subjecting the AID people who came up to defend the appropriations request to a third degree harassment with a whole series of minor questions which they couldn't fairly be expected to know the answers to and then trying to ridicule them. He had a staff member who sat beside him and whispered the questions in his ear during the whole process of the hearing. I was up there for the AID appropriations for that year and was on the stand for four hours continuously. At the end of that time I don't think I have ever been so tired in my life. I think I didn't let slip one unguarded answer toward the end on which he pounced to try to show that our AID appropriation at the level we were requesting was not justified. I don't know how much you dealt with Passman.

Q: I saw him but I never faced him.

MENDENHALL: It was the AID people...

Q: There was a Congressman from Maryland who was a problem too about that time as I remember.

MENDENHALL: No, I didn't...Oh, yes, I remember there was one—Long. He became chairman later. Passman finally got his comeuppance. He was put on trial for something in respect to Korea, I can't remember it now, but that ended his political career. I don't even remember what the outcome of the trial was, but it ended a long congressional career.

The other man who gave me a certain amount of grief was also from Louisiana and that was Senator Ellender, Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. I remember he harassed me at one point during an open, public hearing to the point where my middle

daughter, then about 14 or 15 and sitting in the audience, got up and shook her fists at Senator Ellender saying, “You can't treat my daddy this way.”

Q: This is tape 3 continuing an interview on February 14, 1991 with Ambassador Joseph Mendenhall. When that other tape ended you were relating some of your encounters with Senator Ellender and Congressman Passman in defending the AID program. Would you like to proceed from there?

MENDENHALL: Yes I would like to talk a bit about an interesting encounter with Senator Packwood from Oregon who was then a freshman Senator and is now the ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee. In 1968, Jim Grant, the Assistant Administrator of the Vietnam Bureau, before he left had driven through the U.S. government a policy decision in favor of the initiation of a drastic land reform program in South Vietnam. He even insisted in getting the signature on the cable of Henry Kissinger who was then the National Security Advisor. Everybody approved and that became the official policy of the U.S. government.

I was all in favor of it. I did think it was important that farmers buy the land and not be given it on a grant basis because my experience in Laos was that when we in the Aid Mission did anything completely on a grant basis for rural villagers they regarded it as “the American project” and not theirs and if the communists came along wouldn't raise a hand in defense of it. On the other hand, if one involved the villagers, say in the construction of the school they provided all the labor on a self-help basis and we provided the materials, they had a real interest in that school because they had put something into it and would defend it against the communists.

So I felt that in South Vietnam it was important for the farmers to have a personal stake in the land reform program by having paid at least something for the land they got.

This position that I held became known fairly widely in the government when I became the head of the Vietnam Bureau in 1969 and one good day Senator Packwood summoned the

AID Administrator and myself to his office on the Hill and read the riot act to us as though I was completely opposed to the land reform program. I endeavored to explain my position but it is sometimes a little difficult to get some things across when a preconceived idea gets into the head of a man up on the Hill. Packwood had by his side a professor from the State of Washington who was known as a man who thought that the total key to victory in South Vietnam and the war was land reform. Nothing else mattered. Land reform would give us the victory. He was the man who was feeding ideas into Packwood's head.

Later the chief Agricultural Credit official from South Vietnam came to Washington on a visit and I arranged for a luncheon on the eighth floor of the State Department for him and invited Senator Packwood to attend the luncheon. I thought I would try to demonstrate to him that my heart was in the right place; that I was supporting agricultural development in every way possible in South Vietnam. Unfortunately during this luncheon it became clear that the Vietnamese director of agricultural credit was not particularly in favor of the land reform program. So this whole effort of mine boomeranged with Packwood. I came out worse than I was before I went in as far as he was concerned.

Later the professor from the State of Washington who had been with Packwood when the AID Administrator and I had been in his office and subjected to his third degree, published an article in the Seattle Post Intelligencer which was front page banner headline attacking me personally for opposition to the land reform program in Vietnam. When this was brought to my attention I sent out a letter in response to the article. The newspaper did indeed publish the letter which explained my position but then published a retort of the professor's side by side, which further confirmed that in a battle with the press you can never really win because they always have the last word, simply because of the nature of the media.

Another congressional experience which I think may be worth recording was one with Senator Ted Kennedy who was the Chairman of the Refugee Subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee. Kennedy had manifested very great interest in the refugee program

in Vietnam, much of it I think for his own political reasons. He decided in March, 1969 that he would conduct public hearings on that program. The AID Administrator and I were summoned up to testify. To open the hearings, somewhat to my surprise and annoyance, Senator Kennedy read out the conclusions of the hearings before they actually opened. Why? Because the press was there for the opening of the hearings and would not be there later during the continued sessions. So his conclusions had already been given to the public before he even listened to us. That has, I think, rather influenced my views of Senator Kennedy over the years.

The other man with whom I had a certain amount of experience over the years is one whom I know you have a different regard for from mine, Tully. That is Senator Claiborne Pell. I met Senator Pell in the summer of 1968 over dinner at a club here in Washington and at that dinner he and I got involved in a rather heated exchange over the war in Vietnam. He was a dove and I was a hawk. I didn't think much more about that until I learned toward the end of 1969 that Pell had made it clear to Bill Macomber, the Under Secretary for Management in the Department, that he would oppose me for nomination to any significant position in East Asia or indeed elsewhere if it involved anything of any importance. And that explained to me why the year I was head of the Vietnam Bureau in AID I was always Acting and never named officially and my name submitted to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I had never thought very much about it. I had as full authority Acting as I would have had with Senate confirmation and I had developed excellent rapport with AID people—indeed when I left at the end of that year I was given a very find sendoff from the AID Administrator and my colleagues as Assistant Administrators. But that did explain why I had never been formally nominated and confirmed.

Q: He must have learned all that from Fulbright who used those tactics.

MENDENHALL: To me, Pell is a reverse McCarthyite, the way he pursued me, the way Javert pursued Jean Valjean in “Les Miserables.”

At the end of 1969 the Administration decided to nominate a Republican as the Assistant Administrator for Vietnam. I decided it was time anyway for me to come back to the Department. I had been four and a half years on loan to AID which was, from a career standpoint, long enough. I enjoyed it, learned a great deal and look back upon it as one of the highlights of my career. The Inspector General, Fraser Wilkins, asked me whether I would take on an inspection job and I agreed to do so. Interestingly, I indicated some interest in going to Italy—there was to be an inspection in Italy in early 1970. When Fraser got the assignments worked out whom do you think he called to say that he was giving us Italy—not me, but my wife. He knew that my wife was especially interested in going to Italy.

Q: That sound just like Fraser.

MENDENHALL: You know what the consequences of that were, Tully. I never had an assignment to Italy during my career except for this inspection one. Indeed before going on this inspection I had spent only one night in Italy in my life, catching a ship in Genoa when I left Switzerland in 1955. But as a result of those two months of inspection, first in Trieste, Milano, Firenze and finally in Roma, my good wife fell head over heels in love with Tuscany; would not rest until we bought a piece of land and she stayed there later a year by herself to supervise the construction of a house. I was living in your house in the meantime.

Q: I believe we charged you rent because...

MENDENHALL: Oh, I insisted upon that.

She learned her Italian by being on the spot every day with the workmen and by the summer of 1972 we had a house there. As you well know, we ultimately retired there and have been there 15 years since that time. All this as a result of the inspection experience of early 1970 in Italy.

My inspection period lasted for about two and three quarters years. I inspected mainly in Western Europe. Almost all of the major countries of Western Europe with the exception of France. The only country in Eastern Europe was Yugoslavia. I inspected Iran and North Yemen in the Middle East and quite a number of countries in Africa, both in the North and in Black Africa. Outside those areas the only place I inspected was Jamaica.

I enjoyed my inspection experience very much. At that time inspectors made assessments of U.S. policy with respect to countries inspected which I found perhaps the most challenging aspect of all of inspecting. We also at that time wrote efficiency reports on every American in the mission. I stress these two things because I have the feeling that the functions of the Inspection Corps have altered considerably since the days you and I were in the Service.

Q: I am not sure they write that many efficiency reports which is too bad because they were the most objective efficiency reports that you have.

MENDENHALL: I was very pleased at one stage when my friend Bob Barbour, who was then working in Personnel, said to me that the people in Personnel valued my inspection reports to the extent that when a name came up for consideration they would ask if there was a Mendenhall inspection report in the file. He said, “You were fair to both the employee and the Department in your assessment.” This was not an easy thing because all these reports had to be shown to the individual and all individuals are well aware that efficiency reports are the means by which promotions are determined. If one had anything adverse to say, one usually brought about a protest on the part of employees. One had to be prepared to justify any remarks that could be interpreted to be in an adverse nature. What I did was to simply try to present an objective picture of what the employee was doing, both in terms of quantity and quality. Let the record speak for itself.

Q: That must be a terribly high pressure, harrowing job.

MENDENHALL: Well it was. I think my stomach reacted to it at times. It was a difficult job writing efficiency reports on everyone. I always found that just as a regular supervisor, efficiency reports were one of the more difficult things I had to do. But as an inspector, one was constantly engaged in that.

I was also very pleased at the end of my inspection service when the then Inspector General, Tom McElhiney, wrote in my final efficiency report that I was the best inspector he had. So I concluded my inspection career with a feeling of satisfaction.

My inspection tour came to an end when I was nominated in August, 1972 as Ambassador to Madagascar. I had gotten a cable, while I was in Madrid inspecting, from the Department asking whether there was any reason why I shouldn't be nominated as Ambassador to Madagascar. I guess this was a routine inquiry sent to all ambassadorial nominees. I cabled back that I was not aware of any reasons why I shouldn't be. When I came back that summer before my nomination had been formally approved—it had been approved by the White House and sent to the Senate—I spoke to Bill Hall, the Director General for the Foreign Service, and told him verbally about the problems I had had with Senator Pell, which I mentioned a few minutes ago. He said, “Don't worry about that at all. Pell was about to be selected out of the Foreign Service when he resigned in 1952, so you don't need to worry at all about that.” I was very pleased to hear his verdict, but I thought he should know that there could be some problems with Pell on the committee.

I went up for my hearing in early September. I had gone to the University of Delaware, though I had been born in Maryland and was a resident of Maryland. A Senator from Delaware, because of a mutual friend of ours, took an interest in my nomination. Indeed I had put him up overnight when I was AID Mission Director to Laos and he was out there on a mission. This was Senator Boggs, who was very much a gentleman. He took a personal interest in my nomination. He invited me up to the Senate for lunch in the Senate dining room, introduced me to others—I remember Lloyd Bentsen was there—and said he would speak to Senator Aiken who was the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations

Committee about me. He did and when I went up for my hearing the principal line of questioning to which I was “subjected” was by Senator Aiken talking about my relationship with his state of Vermont because one of my sons-in-law comes from Vermont. Senator Fulbright absented himself from the hearing—I don't know why. Senator Sparkman, who was very much a gentleman, presided. So I had no problems at the hearing at all. Pell was not present.

I got back to the Department and almost immediately received a telephone call from Senator Pell to say that he had wrestled with his conscience whether to be present and oppose me at the hearing but had finally concluded that he would absent himself from the hearing, but that he still felt it was very unwise of the government to be choosing me to go out to Madagascar as ambassador. Well, I had come back from the Senate hearing feeling rather euphoric but Pell succeeded very much in deflating that feeling. I still have no love for the present Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

I went to Madagascar that fall and found indeed that that ambassadorial assignment was anticlimactic after my experiences in Vietnam and Laos.

Q: Like mine to Bulgaria.

MENDENHALL: U.S. interests are so limited. Indeed, before I went out Dave Newsom, who was then Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, said to me that the biggest problem I was going to have to learn in Madagascar was how not to work. He said, “You have held important jobs in your career which have kept you extremely busy and active, but out there you will find that there is not much to do and your greatest problem is going to be how to accommodate yourself to that.” And indeed he was right.

There were only two U.S. interests in Madagascar. One was port visits by our naval vessels in the Indian Ocean and the second was a NASA space tracking station. I wanted to do what I could to preserve those two interests but found that I was confronted with a very radical Foreign Minister by the name of Ratsiraka. I tried cultivating him over the first

several months. He was interested in getting aid from the United States and I said, “On the basis of my experience there is no use trying to get aid from certain agencies in the U.S. government where there is no possibility of getting it for Madagascar, let's try where there is a possibility. Let's ask those agencies where we might get something—among others the Export-Import Bank.” That was the tack that I took. I did everything I could to get a modest amount of aid, but this Foreign Minister was resolved to move Madagascar into the radical camp. At that time he was severing the old relations with France. France had a base in northern Madagascar at Diego Suarez. The French Ambassador was always dean of the diplomatic corps. The French Ambassador occupied the old governor general's residence. Well this radical Foreign Minister cut the French out of all of these privileges which they enjoyed and then turned to the U.S. and the first thing he did was to take our air attach#'s aircraft away from them. We had used that to move around Madagascar. That was his first step. The second step was not to approve any more port calls.

The final thing, the NASA tracking station remained in existence as long as I was in Madagascar, but this Foreign Minister had come to the U.S. on a visit in the summer of 1973 and said that he wanted $10 or $20 million a year in rent on the basis of the agreement which we had with the Malagasy government. Well, NASA had never paid rent for any of its space tracking stations. I don't know why the word “rent” appeared in the agreement, it shouldn't have, but it gave this Foreign Minister the handle with which to pound us. And he did insistently pound us over the next few years, but NASA was not about to set a precedent by paying rent in Madagascar.Also I think this Foreign Minister was annoyed because during his visit here he was not received by Henry Kissinger, who was then Secretary of State. I mentioned in one of our earlier meetings that this was the kind of thing that sometimes redounds against us when the heads of state, or foreign ministers of these small countries come to Washington and don't get the kind of treatment which they got consistently when they went to Peking or Moscow. I think this further turned Ratsiraka against us.

Well, I decided in early 1975 that the time had come for my retirement. I felt that the U. S. Congress was taking over too much foreign policy, leaving very little role for the executive branch of the government at that particular stage in our history. There wasn't much more I could do in Madagascar, so when one of these periodic programs where one can apply for retirement within a certain window of time with an advantageous pension came along, I opted for retirement at the end of January 1975. The last day of January I got a cable from the Director General of the Foreign Service saying, “Would you like to be considered for one of the UN ambassadorial posts—the one dealing with economic and social affairs.” Well that was that area of activity for which I had declined two jobs years earlier in my career and had no interest in that job and utterly no interest in living in New York. So I cabled back, “Thanks, but no thanks.”

So my retirement became effective on the end of January, 1975, but I elected to stay on in effect as a political appointee ambassador for another four months, which had an interesting aftermath. In mid February a coup was mounted in Madagascar against the Malagasy Prime Minister. He was assassinated in the coup. This was a coup of the black people against the brown people. The Malagasy population consists of the two. The brown people are of Polynesian origin. Nobody knows when or how they came to Madagascar. The brown people, when Madagascar was an independent country had traditionally held the blacks, who had come from the mainland of Africa, in subjection and indeed slavery. So there was no love lost between these two people. The browns had traditionally prevailed. But by the mid-20th century, the blacks were in the majority and this coup was blacks against browns. The blacks did assassinate the colonel who was a brown Prime Minister. It was really military against military—two opposing military camps. Our residence happened to be in the valley between the two opposing military camps.

As soon as I got the first word about the coup attempt, on the basis of my earlier experiences of two coups in Vietnam and one in Laos, I rushed to the office in order to stay in contact with Washington reporting what was developing. I felt that my good wife,

who was alone in the house with the servants had had enough experience with coups in Vietnam and Laos that she knew what to do—keep your head low. Indeed, she went down into the basement with the five servants and stayed there during the first day of the coup.

We had three emergency radios in the residence to enable her to stay in touch with me at the office. Every one of those radios failed when the emergency came so pretty soon I was out of communication with my wife. I wasn't unduly worried because I thought she would simply stay put which was the safest place to be with all this gunfire passing overhead. The next morning my defense attach# came to me and said, “I am going to go out and get Mrs. Mendenhall and bring her to the embassy.” I said, “Look, you are going to subject yourself to an undue risk. She knows what she is doing. She will stay there.” He insisted that he was going. He left and it turned out that it was just as well that he did. He arrived at the residence and my good wife, Nonie, was just about to get into our little Volkswagen bug and head for the office because the servants had all gone home at that stage and she didn't want to be alone any longer. She would have headed right into the worst part of it because she didn't know where the fighting was taking place, whereas my defense attach# did. He arrived at exactly the right moment to rescue her and take her to his house so that she did not get involved in the fighting directly. But it was a sort of an ugly experience for her for about 24 hours.

Pretty soon thereafter the fighting subsided, the coup was over, the blacks in effect took over the government. The man who became the head of it after I left was the fellow who had been the radical Foreign Minister, he was a black. He ousted our NASA space-tracking station. He is still there. That was in 1975 and this is 1991. For many years, perhaps still, he was guarded by North Koreans at his residence. He proved extremely radical during the early years of his regime. I think he has softened somewhat since. I have no direct evidence of his connection with the coup, but I wonder.

Well, Tully, came May, 1975 we packed our bags. We left Madagascar, moved to Italy where we have been ever since.

Q: Pruning olive trees.

MENDENHALL: Pruning olive trees. Thus endeth the saga of Joseph Mendenhall.

Q: You didn't totally quit thinking in the fifteen years since then. I know you have written a bit. Do you want to say a little bit about what kind of interests you have maintained?

MENDENHALL: Well, I certainly maintain a very active interest in foreign affairs. I have written a very occasional article or book review for publication. I have also written my memoirs for private family purposes. You have gotten a lot of it in our series of oral interviews. In Italy I have been primarily a farmer keeping myself in good shape physically and keeping my place looking well. We also do a fair amount of traveling. We take a trip every year from our place, often by car, sometimes farther afield by plane or on a tour. We also are devotees of opera, particularly Italian opera. At the moment that may be a bit difficult. I think the Italian government is cutting back very greatly on its subsidies to the opera theaters. Last fall, for instance, Florence which has always had a fall opera season had none I think because of the cut in the subsidies.

Q: You used to in the summer get first class opera in all the little towns.

MENDENHALL: Yes, that's right. Another opera festival which had become very famous internationally is the Rossini Festival in Pesaro which was started about ten years ago and had become not only one of the most fashionable, but one of the best opera festivals in the world. I saw an article last summer that there may be no further festivals there for financial reasons. So that reason for our presence in Italy is dwindling.

We also like good Italian food, although Italy has become enormously expensive like almost all countries in Western Europe with the possible exception of Portugal. We went there 3 or 4 years ago and it hadn't been in the European Community long enough to become expensive yet.

Turkey, you know is trying to get into the Community. Turkey is still relatively cheap. Not only during my first post but I found on two trips back there during the 1980s that it is a splendid place to visit. From the standpoint of history there is as much to see in Turkey as in any country in the world because of all the civilizations that have existed there over the centuries, such as Hittite, Hellenistic, Byzantine, Selchuk and Ottoman Turk.

Q: Large parts of it people don't get to—the ordinary tourist don't get to.

MENDENHALL: The last trip we made in 1989, we rented a car for a couple of weeks in Ankara and spent several days in Cappadocia which we hadn't seen before. Then went to the crusader castle area down in the south and then to the Hittite area east of Ankara. Also visited the Selchuk towns. The Selchuks were the first Turks in Turkey back in... oh, the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries was when their civilization was at its height. They left some superb remains both south and east of Ankara. In fact one town to which we almost canceled our visit because it was out of our way, Sivas, proved to have absolutely splendid Selchuk remains. And I didn't see a single other tourist there. So, aside from the conflict with Iraq, which will eventually be settled, I certainly commend Turkey to anyone who is interested in that kind of tourism.

Q: You have to be a little more adventuresome than you do in some of the more traditional places.

MENDENHALL: That is right.

Q: Well, now do you have any final roll up about the Foreign Service, U.S. diplomacy, about what the future should hold, etc.?

MENDENHALL: There is one thing directly relevant to the Foreign Service which I find disturbing. The talks I have these days indicate that morale in the Service is not at a very good level at the present time. When I inspected those two and three quarter years, going to many posts, there was only about one case of bad morale I found the entire time. I am

talking about overseas. I would expect to find morale here low, but abroad morale was generally extremely high, which I understand is not the case today. I have no suggestions as to how to remedy this. I don't know enough about the present situation, but I deplore the fact that morale has changed so much in a Service that both you and I loved. I have said to many of my friends that I would not have traded my career for any other in the world, except one possibly—to be an opera singer and I can't sing a single note and would not have been very successful.

The other thing that I might say in conclusion is that I personally feel that the present Administration is conducting a very effective foreign policy on behalf of the United States. I can't fault it in any respect. I know there have been complaints that it has appointed too many political ambassadors and not enough career men, and that may well be the case. But other than that in terms of substance I think the Administration has handled every situation it has encountered extremely well. Just as I approved of what the Reagan Administration did in the foreign policy field. I wouldn't say as much for either in the domestic field where I have some differences, particularly with respect to budgetary policy. In the foreign policy field I think those two Administrations have furthered U.S. interests in a remarkable manner.

I think I will stop at that, Tully. I enjoyed this session just as I did my career.

Q: Thank you very much indeed. This will be a great addition to the archives.

End of interview